

PC XBOX 360 GBA DS MOBILE PSP PLAYSTATION 2

OCTOBER 2006 VOLUME 9 ISSUE 7

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING COMPUTER GAMING & TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

NAG



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June 2006



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CONTENTS

REGULARS

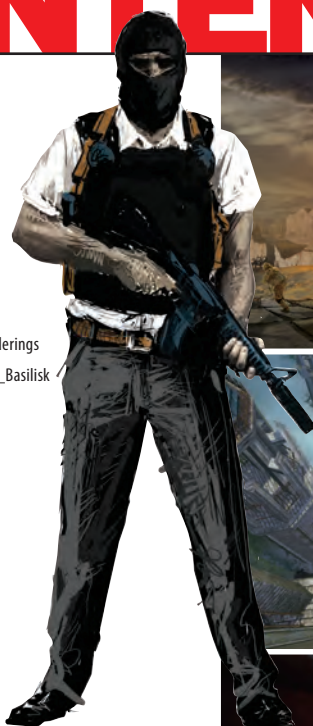
- 10** Ed's Note
- 12** Inbox
- 14** Bytes
- 24** Calendar
- 26** Opinion – Miktar's Meanderings
- 28** Opinion – Domain of The_Basilisk
- 30** Opinion – Dammit
- 32** Opinion – Kingpin
- 124** Multiplayer – News
- 128** Multiplayer – Online
- 130** Multiplayer – MMO
- 132** Game.Dev
- 140** Lifestyle – Movies
- 142** Lifestyle – Comics
- 144** Lifestyle – Raven's Loft
- 146** Game Over

FEATURES

- 34** Kane & Lynch: Dead Men Interview
- 42** Leipzig Games Convention 2006
- 104** AMD Revs Up
- 138** DOOM In-A-Box

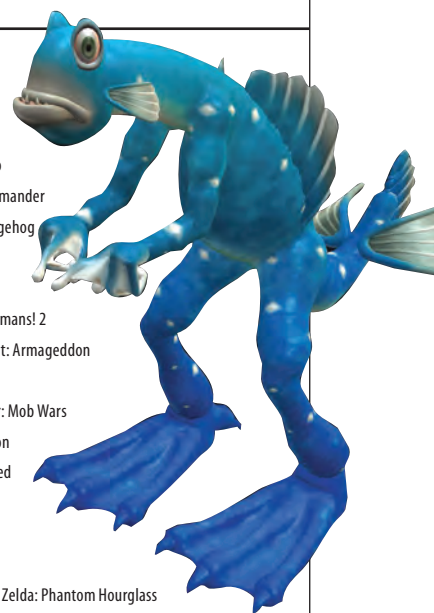
HARDWARE

- 102** Hardware Introduction
- 106** Asus PSB Deluxe motherboard
- 108** Fujitsu Siemens Amilo X Series notebook
- 110** Palit 7600 GT graphics card
- 111** AData Vitesta Extreme Edition PC8000 RAM
- 112** Trust 5.1 Surround USB Headset
- 113** iTGear PMP MP4 player
- 114** H@RDCOR3 – AM2 motherboards
- 122** Lazy Gamer's Guide – Microsoft Habu gaming mouse



PREVIEWS

- 50** Previews Intro
- 52** Supreme Commander
- 54** Sonic the Hedgehog
- 56** Call of Juarez
- 58** Sam & Max
- 60** Destroy All Humans! 2
- 62** Mortal Kombat: Armageddon
- 64** Saints Row
- 66** The Godfather: Mob Wars
- 68** Hospital Tycoon
- 70** Assassin's Creed
- 72** The Darkness
- 74** Paraworld
- 76** Just Cause
- 78** The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass
- 78** Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin



REVIEWS

- 80** Reviews Intro
- 82** DEFCON [PC]
- 86** War on Terror [PC]
- 88** Reservoir Dogs [PS2]
- 90** DarkStar One [PC]
- 92** Half-Life 2: Episode One [PC]
- 94** Miami Vice [PSP]
- 95** Forbidden Siren 2 [PS2]
- 96** Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow [PS2]
- 97** Shadowgrounds [PC]
- 98** Super Princess Peach [DS]
- 98** Big Brain Academy [DS]
- 99** Tokobot [PSP]
- 100** Tropical Madness [MOB]
- 100** Tour de France 06 [MOB]
- 100** Zoo Tycoon 2 Mobile [MOB]

ON THE DVD

DEMOS

Bad Day in LA | Caesar IV | Call Of Juarez Multiplayer | Joint Task Force
| Just Cause | Maelstrom | Painty | Paraworld | Perimeter: Emperor's
Testament | The Silver Lining | WH40K - Dark Crusade
ATI Catalyst 6.8 XP | NVIDIA ForceWare 91.47 XP
Defcon | NAG April 2000
Bontago | FEAR Combat v1.07 | Toribash
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Half-Life 2 Episode 2 - 01 | Half-Life 2 Episode 2 - 02
Half-Life 2 Episode 2 - 03 | Half-Life 2 Episode 2 - 04
Half-Life 2 Episode 2 Trailer | Kane Revealed
Portal | Team Fortress 2 | Warhammer Online

UPDATES & PATCHES

Darkstar One v1.2
FEAR v1.00 to v1.06 - v1.07
Shadowgrounds v1.04
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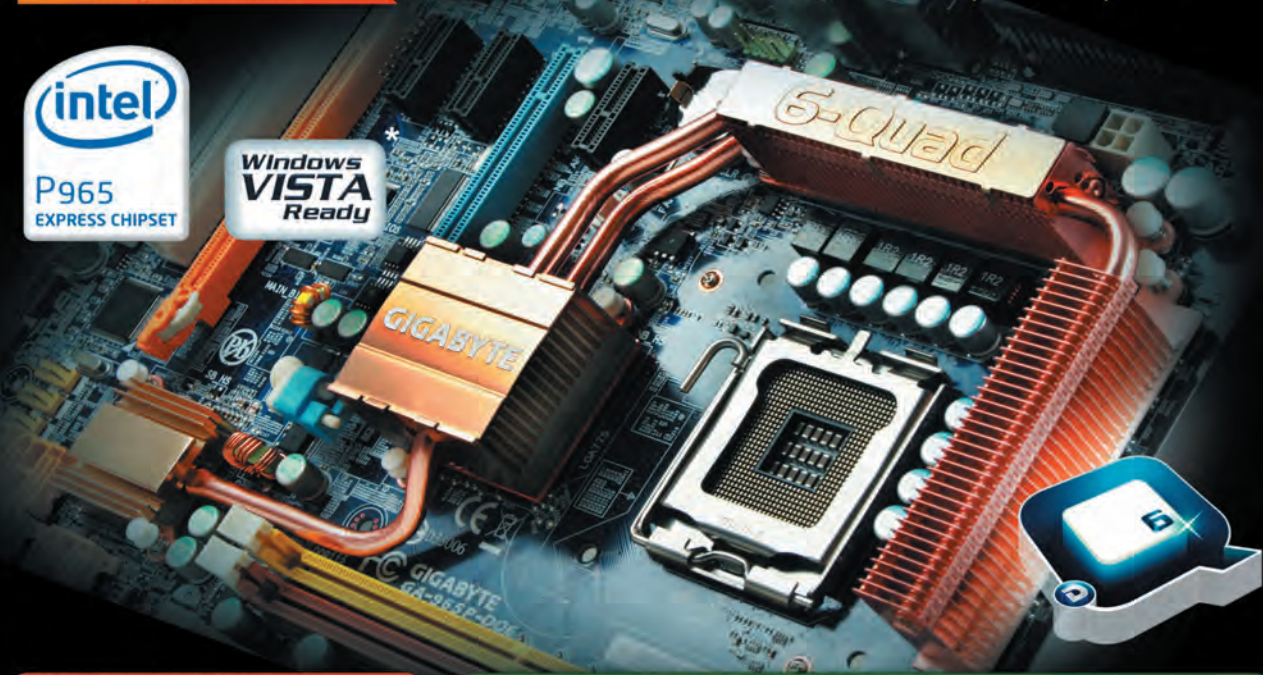
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* Windows VISTA Ready Requirement : ¥ High Definition Audio ¥ DirectX 9.0 VGA

The bad news is that the PlayStation 3 has been delayed. This might not be really big news on the eve of the 360's local launch, nor if you've been keeping track of all the problems Sony has had with Blu-ray's manufacturing. Microsoft barely managed to pull off a global launch, and one that didn't even include territories such as South Africa. A November launch in South Africa was never likely, but no one mentioned it, because no one speaks out much in such a small industry as we have locally. It's unfortunate, but it's also the by-product of wanting the industry to grow and the cost of doing business.

Even if the PS3 did arrive locally in November, it would have had several major obstacles to overcome. First is the incredible price. The top-end 60GB version was listed on a local online retailer for over six grand, a price that distributor Ster Kinekor Games wouldn't comment on. However, we knew the PS3 was going to be costly, not just 'high-end graphics card' pricey. Sony has justified this in two ways: there are no plans for a PS4 until ten years after the PS3, and you get the Blu-ray player as well. Nevertheless, in this country, DVD sales, like games, are quite humble, have a history of over-pricing, and compete with a large black market. Blu-ray and any new HD video format don't mean much to the SA market and won't for a long time. So that's no selling point. Finally, the PS3 has to go up against the 360. If the 360 did well, it would be tough to convince people why they should spend nearly twice the amount on a PS3. If it failed, there would simply be no chance for a R6,000+ machine to get a foothold at all. We shouldn't forget that the 500K+ local PS2 user base took years to create through many deals, marketing and price cuts. The market is growing, but South Africa is still far from claiming a strong gaming presence globally.

The delay to March 2007 is a good thing. It will let Sony and Ster Kinekor Games get their house in order. If you asked me, Sony should have been smart and pocketed a few 360 licenses - diversifying its portfolio, if you will. Still, the delay buys the PS3 valuable time. Sony as a whole faces a problem. While there's no doubt that the PS3 will do well, no one appears willing to claim that it will do as well as the PlayStation 2, and all the negative press it has brought upon itself just risks stunting the console even more. The PS3 is part of a set of massive gambles Sony has taken to re-secure its consumer electronics market share, and if done right, will make the company almost insurmountable. Unfortunately, Microsoft is a big shark. If anything, Redmond knows how to infiltrate a market. Just ask Netscape or Apple's OS department.

James Francis [Editor]



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LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: PSFreak

SUBJECT: NFS Carbon

I read your article on the next-gen version of the longstanding franchise *Need for Speed* and have an alarming thought about their idea of mountain pass racing. This has been done before in an anime called *Initial D*. Shuichi Shigeno [the manga's author] would be proud to see his realisation of drifting events in Japan that predates all movies about drift. When I saw *Initial D* first stage, I couldn't wait to watch the second, third and, finally, the fourth stages of this amazing series. My love for drifting increased even further and I eventually tried it in the mountain routes we have here in Cape Town. Unfortunately, my poor choice of a vehicle could not perform the amazing drifting technique that was used in *Initial D*. I had to search for my drifting glory in the likes of *Underground* and *Underground II*. When I saw your review of *Most Wanted*, I



was astonished beyond belief that the graphics would look so much crisper than the previous two games.

The cars simply looked amazing, but not close enough to my ultimate favourite, *Gran Turismo*, which by now has given me the fame amongst friends as a top contender for professional racing. Of my ten years of racing practice, I can think of only three to four months in which I didn't practice my racing style. My disappointment in *Most Wanted* was only because it didn't include drifting, the same as with *Tourist Trophy* where Kazunori Yamauchi decided to exclude proper championships for the biking version of GT. In issue 82 of PSW it was mentioned that the bikes we had the pleasure of racing in *TT*, would also be added to the next-gen *Gran Turismo*, where you would be able to race against the four-wheeled freaks. Making the games look well should not be the only criterion of our next-gen babies. Games should also have replay value.

We have the same problem. After playing Carmageddon and Burnout respectively, we also decided to try it out for real. However, our poor choices in vehicles cut that short. It turns out that no car can self-repair and build up boost while driving in the wrong lane. Unfortunately, our GTA-inspired experiences have been just as unsuccessful, but we bribed the prison guard to get a Net connection and finished this issue. Strangely, Gran Turismo never inspired any such shenanigans from us, instead scaring us away from any real track racing.



The 'Letter of the Moment' prize is sponsored by EA South Africa. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most eclectic chicken scratch.

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Important: Include your details when mailing us or how will you ever get your prize if you win...

TOPIC FOR NEXT MONTH:

DS vs. PSP. Which do you prefer, and what do you love/hate about them?

FROM: Jack Man

SUBJECT: PS3 vs. PC

Since E3, a lot of PS3 videos have been released. The graphics are amazing and the console will start a new gaming era. However, I have also seen videos of new PC games, and the one I would like to point out is *Crysis*. Everybody who has seen the movies has seen that we are moving to photorealistic graphics. Of all the PS3 videos, I haven't seen one even come close to *Crysis*. Everybody is going on about how much better the PS3 will be than the PC. However, does everybody realise that the PS3 is basically a powerful computer? Okay, so the PS3 might be faster than the PC at this moment, but it hasn't been released yet. When I last checked the release date of the PS3 and Windows Vista, they were not so far apart. In addition, with Vista comes the long-awaited DX10. Therefore, when the PS3 is released, at the same time (or soon after) Vista will appear. So, will the PS3 ever be stronger than the PC? If so, I bet its reign of power won't last long. Nevertheless, I'm still getting the PS3.

The old power vs. power debate. However, Crysis is only one game. Remember when Half-Life 2 showed off its cutting-edge DX9 tricks? Not many of the versions we saw people playing actually looked that good. On the flipside, the next-gen consoles have many good-looking titles already, and developers don't need to cut corners for weaker machines. Unfortunately, the PS3 isn't a good example yet, since not a lot of game footage has been shown. Its price will definitely not be easy to digest either. Sony did go and tell everyone the PS3 is a computer, but we all know it is still a glorified console. By the way, calling the PS3 a computer implies such a broad definition that you can call your mobile phone one as well.

FROM: Francois Weich

SUBJECT: Console vs. PC

Stop with the console vs. PC nonsense! Let me explain. As long as you, I, and all the other PC freaks I know keep playing PC games, these games will be developed. Stop with the 'there are ten other games for every PC game'. Stop comparing PCs with consoles.



OF ALL THE PS3 VIDEOS, I HAVEN'T SEEN ONE EVEN COME CLOSE TO CRYSIS

Next order of business: to that person who went on about bad movie complexes. I can't count how many times the magazine has said that if you don't like something, stop complaining and do something about it. It's time to follow your own advice. Write letters, lots of them, with pen and paper. E-mail works too, but is too easily deleted. You could argue that it can get lost in the post, so write two, and post them from different post offices. Then get all your friends to mail the offending entity as well. It would also be a good idea to keep the letters well written and civil. Wars are won with weight of numbers. Another thing you could do is phone management and go 'aggrö' on them - they get scared. Remember, out of 25 countries, SA rates 24th regarding service, so don't expect anything to fall in your lap.

Nah, that's just far too much effort. We'd rather use all that manpower to send off letters begging for money for a new HD television. Then we can avoid cinemas altogether. However, not everyone should forfeit the big screen. Still, instead of

writing many letters, take advantage of sagging attendance and start smuggling in food and drink. Alternatively, get a bunch of people together and take out an ad in a Sunday newspaper. PC vs. console has always existed as a debate, and as consoles become older, the PC will start overtaking them again. It's a good tortoise-hare race, except that they actually need each other and there is no winner. Your mathematics are a bit skewed, though. The PS2 would have the bulk of the games. We hate to say it as well, but there are more PS2 games than PC games if you count from the beginning of this century. That said, a lot of them were rubbish and consoles have no indie scene. At least not yet.

FROM: Zollies

SUBJECT: Cheer and Rant

I think you rock. You go through all this effort to bring gaming in South Africa to the masses, but you do it in such a way that it is enjoyable to read. To top it all off, you have two sister magazines plus a Website to manage - that is no mean feat to achieve. Unfortunately, I am stuck in Germany at the moment, so I am relying on my brother to faithfully buy your magazine each month. My cash flow is limited at the moment, which means I cannot afford a subscription, but to me that's just another hurdle in the way to gaming nirvana. I heard from a source that NAG is becoming boring. Is that true? I do not blame you. There is not much going on in the gaming industry at the moment. The underground scene, however, is bristling, as are MMORPGs. It seems online is the next big thing, although we knew that since the inception of the idea of 'multiplayer'. The problem in South Africa comes in the form of a shortage of money on the gamer's side. Not many people can afford an always-on Internet connection, even less an uncapped one. Add to that the fees of online games that have to be paid, and it paints a pretty grim picture.

The only solution to this problem would be for everyone to move to Seoul. That is quite impossible, so we have to look at alternative measures. All of these have been looked at to the point of exhaustion (cheaper Internet, SNO, more money). Unfortunately, I do not have a brilliant solution to this problem, except for everyone to work hard and be honest and fair and especially not greedy. I am going to stop ranting now. Just be confident in the knowledge that there is still someone

out there who likes your mags (incl. SACM), even though he might just want to add them to his collection.

NAG boring? Maybe. We ran a poll amongst the staff to see if this was true, but they were all too distracted with other things to even read NAG. However, seriously, the magazine can't please everyone. Still, if things are getting a bit dry, tell your source to send us a letter with suggestions. There's always something going on in the industry. Maybe we're just not cracking enough jokes. It's a pity international shipping is so expensive, otherwise we'd send a mag to anyone who wanted one. However, on the upside, at least your bandwidth is a lot cheaper!

FROM: Rowan Jackson

SUBJECT: Game Music

Though anyone who knows me will tell you that I hold EA Games a sizable distance from my heart, I need to congratulate them. EA seems to know what it's doing when it comes to music in games. The *NFS: Underground* and *Most Wanted* games are a testament to what game soundtracks should be. Now, I could argue all day with the *Final Fantasy* fan boys who love their composers, but the modernising effect that contemporary marketed music has on a game can far exceed the effect of antialiasing. Who can forget the sweet trip down nostalgia lane *GTA: Vice City* took us on? There is huge potential for the gaming world through marketed music. Developers need to stop hiding behind the names of famous composers. Their pay cheques are probably pushing up past signing an entire band anyway.

You're right. EA Trax and the snubby radio stations in GTA revolutionised using licensed music. It's not something we see nearly enough of and it was one of the joys of playing Reservoir Dogs. Music (and sound in general) has long been the black sheep of gaming, despite the most valiant efforts by studios. You'd think the Silent Hill series would have given developers more of a hint, but sound is still pretty underutilised in games. Obviously, not everything works with licensed songs in it, but many games do. Don't knock game composers, though. Tomb Raider Legend had a decent soundtrack and Final Fantasy is iconic, to say the least, and who can forget the pumping industrial songs from



WHO CAN FORGET THE SWEET TRIP DOWN NOSTALGIA LANE GTA: VICE CITY TOOK US ON? THERE IS HUGE POTENTIAL FOR THE GAMING WORLD THROUGH MARKETED MUSIC

I AM VERY DISAPPOINTED AT THE AVAILABILITY OF DS GAMES IN SOUTH AFRICA



the first C&C? It looks like Valve got the hint with Episode 2. If the in-game footage from Leipzig is anything to go by, the soundtrack (though not a licensed one) is quite unique.

FROM: Yudistra Thakurdin

SUBJECT: Bah!

The Basilisk said something about skilled CS players being overshadowed by amateur *Halo 2* players. The thing is, seven years ago a mod called *Counter-Strike* came out, and this mod also rewarded amateur gamers who had discovered the 'trick' to aiming and so-called 'strategies'. It was nothing like *Quake* or *UT*, yet the insistence on playing CS led to it being at Worfaire and most other major competitive gaming events since. CS gamers should get used to other games because one day CS might die out (we can always hope), and since there's nothing else like CS (thankfully), proper competitive shooters will rule!

Between you and us, we think he's just jealous because a kid got a pro-gaming contract!

FROM: Phil

SUBJECT: Where are the DS games?

I am concerned about how up-to-date SA gaming is - especially regarding handhelds. I read the small article about the DS Lite in NAG last month. I bought one in the UK. Now I am back with four games and I am very disappointed at the availability of DS games in South Africa. Take 2 seems to be the only place to get DS games in South Africa. Will the DS Lite become like the GameCube in SA? I mean, the GameCube died in SA and might this be the same for the DS. Where is a good place besides Take 2 to get good DS games?

*Nintendo SA has its own site to buy the latest DS games (www.nintendo.co.za). Alternatively, Gauteng residents can visit Animeworx for some DS choices (if anyone knows of more places, let us know). If all else fails, you can see if any sites will let you import games into the country. Lik-Sang.com is a good stop for some Japanese titles. We really hope the DS won't go the way of the GameCube in South Africa and availability has a lot to do with that. Let's be honest; the DS could be a lot bigger than it is. Hey, keep trying. How do you think Miktar built up a stack of DS games? The ready availability of games for the PC and consoles is much, much better. **NAG***

CONTENTS

WHAT'S MAKING NEWS
IN THE WORLD OF GAMES

POLYPHONY ON THE PS3

The president of *Gran Turismo*'s developer speaks highly of Sony's console. [\[16\]](#)

MAKE IT SO!

Bethesda announces that it has all the Star Trek captains for *Legacy*. [\[17\]](#)

NO MORE BULLY

Rockstar changes the name of *Bully*'s European version to Latin. [\[18\]](#)

MOVERS & SHAKERS

What's new, what's getting a sequel and what's heading to a new platform. [\[19\]](#)

PS3 FOLD PROTEIN

Sony makes a deal with scientists that will help study diseases. [\[20\]](#)

YOKOHAMA!

AMD and ATI reveal the first product from their newfound partnership. [\[20\]](#)

PS GOES PINK

In case you were getting tired of your PS2 or PSP in those boring neutral colours, Sony has launched a new range of the devices in shocking pink. [\[22\]](#)

NVIDIA HEADS FOR THE MIDDLE

Two new products from NV means more bang for your buck. [\[22\]](#)

CALENDAR

What's happening and what you can buy this month. Plus advice about what to do with stacks of old business cards. [\[24\]](#)



SOUTH AFRICAN TO DIRECT HALO

SOUTH AFRICANS CAN SOON boast their own piece of gaming history when the *Halo* movie opens in 2008. Peter Jackson, the movie's executive producer, announced his choice for the movie director as Neill Blomkamp. The South African, based in Vancouver, has been working hard in the film industry since 1997, where he's credited for 3D animation on *Stargate SG-1*. He was nominated for an Emmy as part of a team who worked on a *Dark Angel* episode, and he shares a VES award for a Citroën ad in which a car break-dances. Initial reaction to the news was mixed, as this will be Blomkamp's feature debut, though several sites quickly uncovered online videos of work he'd done before. The project that quickly garnered him credit amongst *Halo* fans was *Alive in Joburg*, a seven minute short film that looks at events as aliens arrive and settle in Johannesburg. The short's visual style and feel seem to evoke the same sentiments that *Halo* did, somewhat quelling fans' fears that the movie will turn into an action fest. Online comments on the news were generally positive on the choice after seeing the short film. "Love the segment of them battling the alien towards the start," a user wrote on YouTube, "If *Halo* is anything like that, I will be happy. Very happy."

Blomkamp also eased fan concerns in several online interviews. "From a purely game playing perspective, I am a massive fan of the games," he told Gamespot. "But more importantly, I'm a massive fan of the world and universe of *Halo*, the science fiction world that the games take place inside of."



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SNIPPETS

YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!

A British woman had assets worth £250,000 seized after she was found guilty of making over £850,000 selling **pirated software**. She had spent time in jail before for similar offenses.



Eidos's Ian Livingstone has mentioned that another Tomb Raider movie might be in the works. Right now different script ideas are being evaluated.

Rumours have hit the Web of a new **PSP** in March next year that will have 8GB of flash memory and two thumb-sticks. Unfortunately, the source quoted turned out to be a highly speculative PSM article. Sony has gone on record to say that the rumours are false.

Zombie-fest **Dead Rising** might have run into problems with rating boards in Germany and Japan, but not in Britain. The British Board of Film Classification allowed the game to be released with an 18 rating, saying there's no evidence that games lead to copycat behaviour.



PS3 A "WEAPON FOR REVOLUTION" - POLYPHONY

WITH ITS *GRAN TURISMO* and newer *Tourist Trophy* series of quasi-simulator racing games, Polyphony Digital is not unknown to anyone who's ever been ten meters from a PlayStation 2. President of Polyphony, and car enthusiast, Kazunori Yamauchi recently had a host of nice things to say about the upcoming PlayStation 3, and mentioned how it would change the gaming world.

Commenting on how important high-definition is for videogames, Yamauchi said, "We were surprised at how big a leap the increased resolution brings. I think users will be very surprised too. Games have unusual potential in that they are the fastest, easiest way to produce high-quality, high-definition content. High-definition might be more influenced by games than by movies."

Yamauchi continued to boast about the power of the PlayStation 3. "For the first time in videogames, we can render graphics that are on a par with movies in terms of realism," he said. He also mentioned that the increased power makes it more difficult for developers, due to the added detail that is required. On the subject of the PlayStation 3's online functionality, Yamauchi believes that the PS3



will bring the Internet to millions. "The PS3 is not just revolutionary for videogames; it's revolutionary for television, to put it simply." While Sony has yet to officially comment on the PS3's full online capabilities, Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios president Phil Harrison has dropped hints about downloading movies or TV shows to the PS3's hard drive.

Ending off the hyperbole, Yamauchi said, "Our job is to make games and deliver them to the user, but at the same time, we want to change society. So for us, the PlayStation 3 is our weapon for revolution."

PS3 LAUNCH DELAYED

LONG AWAITED AND SHROUDED in much controversy, the PlayStation 3 console has been delayed until March 2007 in Europe (thus, also South Africa, as it is a European territory). Head of Sony's global computer entertainment division, Ken Kutaragi, said that the machine would still be launched in November in the US and in Japan.

Kutaragi attributed the European delay to problems in mass-producing elements of the high-definition Blu-ray Disc drives in the machines. Sony reports that it still aims to ship six million new PlayStations by March.

This delay gives Microsoft's Xbox 360, which launched last year, another Christmas without facing a challenge from Sony in Europe. Speaking at Sony's global headquarters in Tokyo, Kutaragi apologised for the delays. "I am so sorry not to be able to answer all the expectations," Mr Kutaragi said.

Sony has also announced that it now expects to only ship two million units of the PlayStation 3 by the end of this year, half of the original four million-unit target.

CAPCOM

DEVIL MAY CRY 3
DANTE'S AWAKENING *Special Edition*

PlayStation 2

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EA BRINGS BACK CLASSICS FOR PSP

ELECTRONIC ARTS HAS ANNOUNCED that it will soon release a compilation of 14 classic console games for the PSP, dubbed 'EA Replay', featuring games exclusively from the 90s. According to EA, with EA Replay it is "... giving back the gamers what they loved about videogames." Talking about Replay, David McCarthy, executive producer on the project, said, "We are very excited to be offering PSP consumers an unprecedented glimpse into EA's past. EA Replay is a rich compilation of classic EA IP that stays true to the original experiences, while offering modern gamers additional features geared towards on-the-go gameplay."

EA Replay will include the *Strike* series, *Road Rash*, and *Wing Commander*, while the other names in the list include *B.O.B.*, *Budokan*, *Haunting Starring Polterguy*, *Mutant League Football*, *Syndicate*, *Ultima: The Black Gate*, and *Virtual Pinball*.

Presently under production in Vancouver by EA Canada, EA's main hub for PSP development, EA Replay will ship to retailers on 7 November 2006. It will be available at a suggested retail price of \$19.99.



EA has signed a deal with fashion house 55DSL, which means exclusive garments from the label "... will feature prominently on key in-game characters in the game" **Need for Speed: Carbon**. Just what we need: fashion-conscious game characters.

Ubisoft has bought *Driver* developer Reflections. Hopefully this will breathe new life into the franchise, which has been doing dismally of late. Ubisoft also recently revived the fortunes of **Might & Magic** when it bought the license from 3DO.



DOG-EAT-DOG WORLD

FORGET *BULLY*, NOW ROCKSTAR'S newest addition to its long list of 'games that upset parents' has been titled *Canis Canem Edit*, which translates to 'Dog Eat Dog'. It is the motto of Bullworth Academy, the fictional school in which the game takes place. Reasons for the name change have not been officially announced, although considering the anti-bullying campaigns, members of parliament and other elements working against the game, it's easy to hazard a guess. Ironically, *Canis Canem Edit* follows the lead protagonist as he works against bullies and other school social cliques.

2 MILLION DS PLAYERS ONLINE

ON 24 AUGUST, NINTENDO proudly announced that someone, somewhere, became the two millionth unique user to log onto Nintendo's Wi-Fi Connection service, using a Nintendo DS. Incidentally, the 100 millionth iTunes purchaser received a personal phone call and free iPod from Apple CEO, Steve Jobs. Nintendo hasn't announced that it would be doing anything similar. Nintendo also revealed that the service has now logged more than 70 million individual play sessions, despite the paucity of Wi-Fi-enabled DS titles. Nintendo hopes that the recently released *Star Fox Command*, with its four-way online dogfights, might bolster these figures even more.

NINTENDO ANNOUNCES MP3 PLAYER FOR DS

SOLD UNDER THE NAME of Play Yan in Japan, it has been confirmed by Nintendo that the MP3 player for the GBA/DS will also enjoy a European release. "Both price and release dates for Europe are still to be confirmed," said Nintendo, but initial reports indicate October to be the most likely month. The MP3 player comes in the form of a GBA cartridge that plugs into the GBA slot of the DS, or into a GBA itself. An SD card with music slots into the cartridge, though it is unclear at this point if Nintendo will bundle an SD card with the player. The unit itself features another headphone port, and a number of different skins can be selected while you're playing music, including (of course), a Mario theme.



FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

TORIBASH

URL: www.toribash.com
GENRE: Turn-based fighting
SIZE: 2.58MB (on the cover DVD)

THERE ARE MANY STRANGE, free games online, and *Toribash* is one of them. The official Website only confounds with its description of the game: "*Toribash* is turn-based fighting game for one or more players. The emphasis is on tactics rather than reaction."

In *Toribash*, you can lock joints, or cause muscles to contract or expand. You make your choices by clicking on the joints to lock, or use the mouse wheel up or down to set the muscle movement. When you hit space, around 10 milliseconds pass and your actions take effect. After that, you can make adjustments, or just let momentum do its work. You can click on the hands of your fighter to make them grab – useful for ripping off arms, legs or heads.

When all is said and done, a replay shows you the fight in real-time – usually it's quite a spectacle of leaps, flips, kicks and flops. Due to how the game works, you can even play it online easily. A server is usually round robin where the



winner remains. You can watch a fight in progress online, and chat to others who are waiting their turn.

There is a lot of strategy to *Toribash*, especially when attempting to do complex moves such as a punch (which involves contracting the pectoral muscles, like a boxer), but ultimately the result is satisfying and humorous. There are no AI players to fight, unfortunately. The single-player mode is more of a hot-seat mode where you and a friend (or just you) can control two characters and make them fight.



MOVERS & SHAKERS

THE DARK KNIGHT OF Gotham is to star in Traveller's Tales next Lego epic, following the success of the **Lego Star Wars** game, in the guise of **Lego Batman**. Several other sequels were also announced recently. Criterion has promised the world **Burnout 5**, a truly next-gen sequel that will use a free-roam city as its playground. Heading for the 360 and PS3, players will be able to build their reputations, taking on random races and challenges. Midway announced that Cartoon Network's **The Grim Adventures of Bill & Mandy** will be released for the Wii, and Ubisoft said the next **Splinter Cell** would do the same. Sam will be in the same adventure as on the Xbox and PS2 versions, but with a completely new control method. Likewise, **Rayman Raving Rabbids** has now been confirmed for the PS2 and PC. PC gamers will soon also be able to play Bioware's **Jade Empire**. The Special Edition, like **Fable's** PC port, will have more features, more monsters, and moves.

Another PC title, **HOMM V**, has an expansion coming. **Hammers of Fate** will feature a new race, more stuff, and a random map generator. PS2 action game **Yakuza** has done well and Sony announced a sequel for later this year (NTSC). However, 360 and PC fans waiting for **Timeshift** will have to buckle down - it's been delayed again, this time to 2007. **Half-Life 2: Episode 2** has also been delayed to early next year. If you need something to do while waiting, **Dark Messiah** will be available on Steam soon.

There have been a few new game announcements as well. Codemasters announced **Fall of Liberty**, an alternative-history WWII shooter for PS3, PC and 360. In Q4 2007, Nazis invade America! Jeff Minter, the legendary Llamasoft developer, has announced **Space Giraffe**, a game that resembles 1980 Atari classic **Tempest**, for Xbox Live Arcade. Gaming Web-comic **Penny Arcade** has decided to get into the action as well, and signed a deal with Hothead Games for a **Penny Arcade** game. More details will follow soon, but it will be episodic and Hothead's president will eat his shirt if it sucks.

Mobile publisher Gameloft has been having a lot of success with solid and enjoyable licensed games, so it will be interesting to see what fans are in store for with the mobile games based on **Lost** and **Desperate Housewives**. **Brothers in Arms** is also going mobile, but to the PSP. The new campaign takes players into new Normandy missions. **Sim City** might also go mobile as well. Japanese game paper Famitsu reported that a DS version, based on **Sim City 3000**, is in development.

Finally, Microsoft is trying to use the football market to promote the 360 as the console to own. Microsoft signed deals that secured both **FIFA 07** and **Pro Evolution Soccer 6** to use the 360 as its exclusive platform for the next year. Hey, it worked for Solid Snake.



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LOST & FOUND

Every month in honour of our favourite TV show, *Lost*, we'll hide the Dharma Initiative logo somewhere in the magazine. It could be in a screenshot, on a piece of hardware or anywhere, really. Find it and send an e-mail to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line [Dharma October]. We'll announce a random winner next month and that person will win a prize from our friends at HomeTheatrePC.co.za.

LAST MONTH'S WINNER



Richard Grieves, p36



Ich the Killer director **Takashi Miike** has been billed to direct a movie adaption of *Yakuza*. Sony also announced a sequel for the game, due in December.

Family Guy fans will be glad to hear that **Seth McFarlane**, **Seth Green**, and the rest of the voice cast from the show are onboard to provide the voices for the game. It was a bit of a given that they would, but at least you have it on paper.

Donator:
core
Team:
a
Finished WUs:
a
Working on:
p285
ACE50 core
Frames Completed:
242/5000
0e14, 80715/frame
Next Frame End:
23:39 Tue 17 Aug 1976
0d:00h:00m:05s
WU End:
18:26 Fri 18 Aug 1976
2d:16h:47m:01s

PS3 TO HELP FIGHT DISEASE

SONY HAS JOINED FORCES with a group of scientists to assist them in understanding a biological process that might cause disease. Protein folding is a process that underpins most of the biology in our bodies, but when the proteins fold the wrong way, diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and various types of cancer can be caused. The problem is that scientists don't really understand how this process works. As such, they have been simulating protein folding virtually. However, the average PC would reportedly take 10,000 days to simulate a complete fold, an event that only takes 10 microseconds to happen in the body.

As such, the project folding@home was launched, where calculations are being done over a distributed network. Similar to SETI@home, FAH sends data packets to idle volunteer machines on the Internet, which crunch the packets and send them back.

Sony has collaborated with FAH to create a version of the software that will work on the PS3. Console users will be able to contribute their PS3s' idle time to the project. Ten thousand of the consoles connected will crunch a thousand trillion calculations per second, which will make it nearly four times faster than BlueGene/L, the world's most powerful supercomputer.

SA ♥ 360

IT SEEMS AS IF South Africans already love the 360, and Seether lead singer and guitarist Shaun Morgan is no different. When home in Los Angeles, he enjoys firing up *Quake 4* and *Top Spin* on his Xbox 360. Seether took the US by storm in 2002, and the band has just released their fourth CD – *One Cold Night*. One of the songs, *Fine Again*, appeared on the *Madden NFL 2003* soundtrack, which naturally resulted in a huge influx of fan support. "Videogames play a huge role in getting new music out to fans," says the rock star. "People still come up to us and say the first they had heard of us was *Madden*."



A PORTAL TO CALL OUR OWN

SOUTH AFRICAN CONSUMERS NOW have their very own Xbox 360 portal. The Website can be accessed by visiting www.xbox.com, where after users have to click on 'International' and then 'South Africa'. The Website will keep gamers up to date on the console, news, views and the official Xbox 360 forums. As this is the official Website, you can expect the information to be trustworthy and direct from the source. Locally, we also have www.xbox-360.co.za, a top-notch community run Website, by the South African community and for the South African community. It contains a rather comprehensive list of all the local 360 owners and their Gamertags, as well as bustling forums.

AMD AND ATI ANNOUNCE YOKOHAMA

AMD'S RECENT PURCHASE OF ATI will only be finalised at the end of this year, pending stockholder approval, but the two companies have already revealed the first fruits of their partnership. According to notebook manufacturers in Taiwan, AMD is taking a more decisive step to take market share in the mobile market. Currently, Intel is king of mobile hardware. Its Centrino series has an edge over competition since the CPU, chipset and wireless chip are all designed and manufactured by Intel. In the past, AMD has had to rely heavily on third parties to meet the other requirements on its mobile boards, putting the company at a disadvantage. ATI, on the other hand, is a big player in the mobile chipset market and is far ahead of competitor NVIDIA. Using this advantage, AMD evolved its Yamato boards to only use ATI's chipsets. Named Yokohama (no relation to the tyre company), it will use two of AMD's Turion 64 chips, the company's competitor to Intel's Centrino Duo. ATI will provide future chipsets for Yokohama, but the wireless chip will still be from a third party. ATI has in the past, though, mentioned plans to develop a wireless chipset down the line.

However, analysts are sceptical about whether Yokohama will be able to compete with NAPA64, the third-generation Centrino platform Intel unveiled in January, and Core 2 Duo for laptops, released in August. The new Centrino machines have an edge in power use and performance, something AMD has long tried to match. Nevertheless, many agree that this is a good sign overall, and that the AMD/ATI approach will deliver some healthy competition in the market to challenge Intel's dominance. The real loser in this deal is NVIDIA. The company lags behind Intel and ATI in the chipsets market, and Yokohama will exclude the company even further from this market.



CAPTION OF THE MONTH

EVERY MONTH WE'LL CHOOSE a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better [funny] caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject [October Caption].



OCTOBER CONTEST

NAG'S LAME ATTEMPT:
"You said a FISH this big? Right..."



SEPTEMBER WINNER

"Hey Buddy, selling single camels is illegal. Minimum packs of 20 with the warning label."

— Dave Loubser

RULES: (1) If you don't use the correct subject line, your mail will be automatically filtered by our spam software and deleted. (2) If you think sending in 20 captions for the same screenshot is how you want to play the system, then put them all in the same mail or we'll keep the top one and delete the rest. You probably won't win anyway because you can't follow simple instructions. And people who can't follow simple instructions don't deserve to win things. (3) Obey all posted speed limits. (4) Never run with scissors. (5) There is no spoon. (6) Don't tell me what I can't do!

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HP PAVILION DV5000

HERE IS A NOTEBOOK that is aimed primarily at the home user with entertainment in mind. The unit packs a 15.4-inch widescreen display and Altec Lansing speakers. QuickPlay technology allows users to enjoy media without having to boot the system up first. It comes with a DVD burner, LightScribe being an optional extra. Another optional extra is a remote control that allows the system to be used as an ordinary hi-fi.

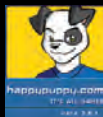


100,000 ZOMBIES CAN'T BE WRONG!

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: BIOSHOCK!

HappyPuppy.

com, once one of the premier gaming sites, has gone up for auction. The sale of the domain is the last step in the steady decline the site has experienced in recent years.



Local flight sim buffs will be happy to hear that local online magazine **SA Virtual Pilot** has launched an online store for expansions and more (www.virtualpilot.co.za)

A report from **Parks Associates** estimates that the online game market in the US will be worth \$4.4 billion by 2010.

CRYSIS

The **Crytek** boys aren't that impressed with next-gen consoles. When asked if **Crysis** would appear on consoles, Crytek's Brend Diemer said, "... next-generation consoles like the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 do not offer the sufficient power."



Xbox Live Marketplace celebrated 50 million downloads at the end of August, which means the service has doubled its downloads in the past three months. Microsoft also revealed that Madden NFL 07 received over two million hours of play on Live in the first week after its release.



Square-Enix is being sued by a magazine and game publisher for \$3.78 million. The group claims that the developer breached a 2004 contract for distributing its MMOs in certain Asian markets.

SQUARE ENIX



THE PS RANGE THINKS PINK

WHILE THE PS2 MARKET is pretty saturated, Sony has decided to appeal to people who've wanted to buy a PSP or PS2, but really wanted it in shocking pink. The company announced that Europe would be getting pink editions of the hardware, right down to the memory sticks. As an added bonus, the PSP will ship with a video on it starring pop star Pink, and the handheld comes with a white pouch and headphones. The PS2 will have two pink dual-shock controllers. There are also rumours that Singstar games will be bundled with this new colour scheme.

LOGITECH CONNECTS PCS WITH STEREOS

PERIPHERAL MAKER LOGITECH HAS extended its move into entertainment hardware by bringing more PCs and stereo systems together. The Wireless DJ Music Center lets users connect the music on their PCs to the music system in their house. With a range of 50 meters, the centre connects a USB connector at the PC with a base station at the music system. The setup includes the Wireless DJ remote, which is aimed at putting your entire music collection at your fingertips. The software supports streaming of all major audio formats such as MP3, AAC, and WMA, as well as streaming radio and podcasts.



ACCELERATED AI TOUTED

THE HARDWARE ACCELERATOR MARKET appears to be undergoing a minor explosion, following the launch of the Ageia PhysX card for the handling of physics calculation duties in supported games.

Now, another unknown manufacturer, called AISeek, has announced that it intends to release its own flagship hardware accelerator card, built around what the company is calling the 'Intia' processor. This new accelerator is focused, as you may have already guessed from the name of the company, on supporting massive scale scenarios in which the AI responds intelligently, with no loss of AI LOD and no additional load on the CPU itself.

Details of the Intia processor itself remain scant, with the company whitepaper revealing only that the solution is based on a new way of dealing with the search intensive nature of AI processing built around a Graph Processing Core (GPC). Some AI problems being tackled by the company include terrain awareness, movement using optimal real-time path finding, and sensory simulation (i.e., simulated line-of-sight, for instance).

GEFORCE 7900 GS AND 7950 GT HEADING FOR MID-RANGE

NVIDIA HAS RELEASED TWO new mid-range options for the budget conscious gamer. The GeForce 7900 GS comes with 256MB onboard memory clocked at 1,320MHz, a 256-bit memory interface and a 450MHz GPU. For slightly more, NVIDIA offers the 7950 GT, which boasts 512MB at 1,400MHz, a 250-bit memory interface and a 550MHz chip. Both cater for the PCI Express market and come in at a much cheaper price than the top of the line cards. NVIDIA announced that the cards would be supported by most of their card partners, such as Asus, Leadtek, Albatron, and Gainward. The cards are priced at \$250 and \$350 respectively.



CHARTS

PC GAMES

#	Title
1	The Sims 2
2	The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff
3	Pirates Of The Carribean
4	Prey
5	World Of Warcraft
6	Need For Speed: Most Wanted
7	The Sims 2: Open For Business
8	Rise & Fall: Civilizations At War
9	Age Of Empires 3
10	Need For Speed: Underground 2
11	Need For Speed: Underground
12	The Sims Deluxe
13	GTI Racing
14	The Sims 2: Nightlife
15	Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle-earth

PLAYSTATION 2

#	Title
1	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas Platinum
2	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
3	Gran Turismo 4 Platinum
4	Burnout 3 Takedown Platinum
5	WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006 Platinum
6	Need For Speed Underground Platinum
7	Rugby 2006
8	Cars
9	Burnout Revenge
10	Fifa Street 2
11	Tekken 5 Platinum
12	Need For Speed: Most Wanted
13	Tomb Raider: Legend
14	Hitman: Blood Money
15	Formula 1 2006

PSP

#	Title
1	Miami Vice
2	Cars
3	Need For Speed: Most Wanted
4	Pink Paradise
5	Daxter
6	Tomb Raider: Legend
7	Juiced Eliminator
8	Loco Roco
9	Pirates Of The Caribbean
10	Field Commander
11	Formula 1 2006
12	Need For Speed: Underground Rivals
13	FIFA Street 2
14	Pursuit Force Platinum
15	Medieval Resurrection



LOGITECH CHILLSTREAM

LOGITECH HAS UNVEILED A new game controller with a built-in fan-based cooling system, which is said to keep gamer's hands cool and dry while playing. Designed for use with a PC this patented ChillStream Technology includes a built-in 40 mm fan that circulates up to 0.1 cubic metres of air every minute, while generating very little noise. The narrow vents on the side of the controller push the air directly onto the hands and fingers and can be controlled with three settings – high, low or off.

"We're always evaluating different kinds of materials and technologies that can help make the gaming experience more comfortable," said Robert van de Vegte, general manager of Logitech in South Africa. "But for intense action-games, there is nothing that can substitute for moving air - it's the best way to keep hands cool and dry. This new controller offers Logitech's unique ChillStream hand-cooling technology without compromising on the size and design of the controller. And the fan is extremely quiet - you'll know it's on only because you can feel the air cooling your hands."

The Logitech ChillStream controller is available locally for R479.00. www.logitech.com



Activision has bought Guitar Heroes publisher Red Octane. However, the deal doesn't include Guitar Heroes and Amplitude developer Harmonix.

World of Warcraft has once again upped its user base. Blizzard announced that seven million subscriptions have been sold.

ALL I HAVE IN THIS
WORLD IS MY BALLS
AND MY WORD.
AND I DON'T BREAK
'EM FOR NO ONE.



SCARFACEGAME.COM

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9

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10

RELEASE: Battlefield 2142 (PC) ▲
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RELEASE: Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2007 (PC) ►
RELEASE: Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2007 (PSP)

16

THE FOLLOWING RELEASE DATES ARE TBA

RELEASE: Dark Messiah of Might and Magic (Collector's Edition) (PC)
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RELEASE: Dark Messiah of Might and Magic (PC)
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RELEASE: F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point Expansion Pack (PC) ▼
Pre-order from kalahari.net for only R209.66
RELEASE: Reservoir Dogs (PC, PS2)
RELEASE: Splinter Cell: Double Agent (PC, PS2)
RELEASE: Star Wars: Battlefront 2 Platinum (PS2)
RELEASE: Test Drive Unlimited (PSP, PS2)

17

RELEASE: The Sims 2: Pets (PS2) ►
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RELEASE: The Sims 2: Pets Expansion Pack (PC)
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RELEASE: Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2007 (PS2)

18

24

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31

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6

RELEASE: Black Buccaneer (PC)
RELEASE: Dungeons and Dragons Deluxe (PC)
RELEASE: Lumines (Platinum) (PSP)
RELEASE: Prince of Persia: Revelations (Platinum) (PSP) ◀
RELEASE: Rollercoaster Tycoon 3 Deluxe (PC)

7/8

NAG FUN FACT:
 In a pinch, paper
 makes for good
 eating - especially
 business cards.

12

RELEASE: Ace Combat: The Balkan War (PS2)
RELEASE: Jaws Unlimited (PS2)
RELEASE: Tekken: Dark Resurrection (PSP)

13

RELEASE: City of Heroes / City of Villains (Combined Edition) (PC)
RELEASE: Mage Knight: Apocalypse (PC)

19

RELEASE: Infected (PSP)
RELEASE: LMA Manager 2007 (PC)

20

RELEASE: FIFA 2007 (Xbox 360)
RELEASE: Neverwinter Nights 2 (PC)
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RELEASE: Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2007 (Xbox 360)



26

RELEASE: Ape Academy 2 (PS2)
RELEASE: Atelier Iris 2 (PS2)
RELEASE: Gitaroo Man Lives (PSP)
RELEASE: Samurai Warriors 2 (PS2) ▼

27

RELEASE: Atari Hits 2006 (PC)
RELEASE: Guild Wars: Nightfall (PC) ▼
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RELEASE: Guild Wars: Nightfall (Collector's Edition) (PC)

28/29

EVENT: The TechnoFaire Cape 2006 consumer expo will be held at the MTN Science Centre at Canal Walk, Century City in Cape Town from Friday 27 to Sunday 29 October. The expo is a showcase for a wide range of technology-based entertainment for the home, including home theatre, personal computing, games and edutainment, gadgets, gizmos and hobbies, and mobile technology. TechnoFaire (www.technofaire.co.za) also includes a series of educational and entertaining events.



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MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS

PERNICIOUSLY PONDERING

By Miktar Dracon

THERE ARE MANY WAYS to look at things, and many ways things can be looked at. Our minds construct a wonderful illusion for us to content ourselves with, using that all-marvellous perception. From there, we engage and act out our whims, choices and responsibilities based on our perceptions. However, I digress. The gaming industry, both locally and internationally, really is a snooker table. That is, if you want to get all metaphorical about it.

However, unlike traditional snooker, this industry plays with its own set of balls, and rules. The rules are as follows: you bring your own ball, and hit it whenever you want to. You score when you hit someone else's ball. You lose if your ball goes down any of the holes on the sides of the table. Very simple, and you use a traditional pool cue. This peculiar game naturally results in some rather interesting results. For the sake of argument, we won't mention how big the table of the metaphorical image we're drawing is - let's just assume it's big enough. Therefore, every player takes a shot, hitting his or her personal ball in the direction of his or her choice. Oh, look, Activision just took a shot at the exact same time as Electronic Arts! They both seem to have been aiming at Eidos, but missed! Yes, it's captivating and utterly chaotic at times. Sometimes, the players will whisper alliances to each other as long as they promise not to aim for certain balls, though naturally this is fleeting. Of course, you could be sitting there aiming your shot in this strange game, when suddenly a ball ricochets off a wall right into yours! However, that's the fun: you never quite know where you'll be taking your shot from. Unfortunately, you may also forfeit the game if your ball goes down a hole. This peculiar game, however, may see players forming teams, to take over for each other when one gets too tired to hit the ball. Often, players who have been knocked out of the game may try to join existing teams, just to get another shot.

We know when the game started, of course. The legendary tome titled 'Wikipedia' contains the tales of those first few pioneers who dared to place their balls on the table. It continues to track the progress of this metaphorical 'house rules' game of snooker, including almost up-to-the-minute rosters of the players and even their individual histories while playing.

On the sidelines are those who watch the game. Like any good sport, people watch this game of snooker for a variety of reasons. Some people want to see who wins. Others wish to meet the players. Large groups arrive just to support certain teams - with cheer and rowdiness. Some people watch only to criticise. Others are trying to find patterns in how the balls ricochet. Others are there to watch the hot sweaty people.

Throughout, the spectators amble about the most honourable of sorts, with vendors selling snacks at skyrocketed

LET'S NOT
FORGET
THOSE WHO
PAINT THE
INDUSTRY AS A
LARGE BLACK
MONOLITH
WITH THE
LETTERS 'SONY'
ON THE SIDE

prices, because you are not allowed to bring your own food. They, in turn, are hired by those who sell tickets to come watch the sport, and also advertise and televise this sport.

Still with me? I lost myself about midway, but I'm glad you're making sense of all this. Of course, if you had to ask someone else, they might paint you a very different picture for a variety of reasons. Some might compare the industry to a zoo, while others might mention thoughts about bacteria. Let's not forget those who paint the industry as a large black monolith with the letters 'SONY' on the side: they are especially precious and special for they are the grit in-between the flagstones, the roughage needed to make sure the lime sets porous for added viscosity.

However, more genially and to the point, there are a lot of ways to paint the industry that produces videogame nectar - and possibly no correct way whatsoever. Therefore, the ambiguity between its attendants is to be expected, since everyone is acting on their own perceptions. Toes are trod, people are bumped and things fall between the cracks, as everyone runs around blind.

At the end of it all, however, you only have to swivel your head 360 degrees while attending rAge to see that it's all worth it in the end. **NAG**



SCARFACE

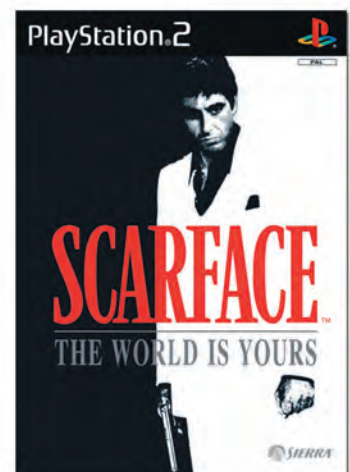
THE WORLD IS YOURS



PlayStation 2

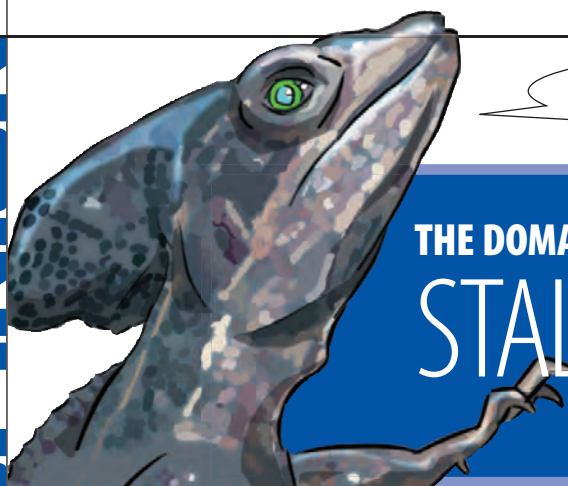


COMING SOON



RADICAL
ENTERTAINMENT





THE DOMAIN OF THE_BASILISK STALINIST GAMES SERVICE

By Anton Lines

WINSTON SMITH WOULD FEEL right at home at the SAIX Games Service (SGS). Using swift punishment and careful propaganda, Big Brother has gone beyond simply suppressing any opposition. Most players these days actually agree with SGS totalitarianism, citing their gratitude to have servers at all, and praising the administrators for protecting them from all those nasty free-speech people. Once again, it seems it falls on me to try to talk some sense into the community.

At SGS, you are banned for asking why a server is out of date. You are banned for questioning the decisions of admins in any way. You are banned for disagreeing with their ideology. You are banned for using Voice over IP programs such as TeamSpeak. You are banned for typing URLs. You are banned for using any nickname deemed offensive, and my personal favourite: you are banned for swearing... in games that carry 17+ age restrictions for violence and strong language. Naturally, however, you are exempt from these rules if you happen to be a friend or relative of the admin.

Long-time readers of this column will remember the comments I made in early 2003. It was about that time that I stopped playing *Counter-Strike*, and the burgeoning *Unreal Tournament* community, to which I gladly migrated, was comparatively unaffected by SGS admin power tripping. Free speech was condoned and everyone got along marvellously. There was no need for rigid regulation, and the foundations of society did not crumble, as SGS would have had us believe. However, in the last few months, the *Unreal Tournament* admins have threatened to uphold the 'Rules of Engagement' more strictly, and I'll be damned if I'm going to keep quiet while the community I helped build goes down the same autocratic road.

Many of the problems I've mentioned can be put down to individual admin incompetence, but this also points to a deeper flaw in the system. The favouritism, intolerance, and inability to take criticism stem from the fact that the admins in question are appointed, not elected, and thus feel no obligation to their communities. In fact, their most common mode of defence is to state, "I don't have to answer to you." Whom, then, do they have to answer to? SGS admins are notorious for backing their own, regardless of the argument, and as such, there is no pressure on them to be fair, or even rational.

The other issues are a direct result of an extremely flawed document known as the 'Rules of Engagement' (formerly called the 'Code of Conduct', until the acronym 'CoC' came to be regarded as a swear word). Most of my complaints about it are fairly self-evident, but the prohibition on swearing seems to require further discussion. Game servers are informal domains in which people use informal language, just like on any sports field



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or any city street corner. The games themselves contain swearing, and in addition to their 'Mature' ESRB ratings, some even come with specific warnings about the conditions of online play. Swear words today only carry associations with historical taboos, and anyone immature enough to be offended by their usage is certainly too immature to be shooting people's virtual heads off.

Finally, I come to an important rebuttal. When confronted with these points, every SGS admin is likely to respond, "It's a free service. If you don't like it, leave." However, SGS is not a free service. Contrary to their claims, the most expensive part of running a gaming server network, and the reason they have no effective competition in South Africa, is bandwidth. Every person in South Africa with a Telkom phone line pays for SGS bandwidth indirectly, and every SAIX user pays for it directly. As with all other commercial enterprises, SAIX and SGS have a responsibility to their customers, and in an ordinary capitalist economy, they would lose users over the failure to honour this responsibility. Fortunately, for them, South Africa is a country riddled with nepotism and monopoly. Nevertheless, it is a state of affairs that cannot last, and if SGS want to stay afloat in a post-monopolistic environment, they're going to have to start listening to reason. **NAG**

NOTES

- The SGS Rules of Engagement can be read at games.saix.net/rules_of_engagement.php.
- SAIX is an acronym for 'South African Internet Exchange'.
- ICASA is an acronym for 'Independent Communications Authority of South Africa'.

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DAMMIT TIME FOR YOUR MEDICINE...

By Megan Hughes

IT'S HAPPENED AGAIN! MY newly repaired, faster running (though, with the mouse still lagging a little now and then), happily noisy and suddenly quicker PC (thanks to someone at Telkom actually performing a function) is back in the repair shop. The real tragedy is, of course, that I didn't even take my own advice and back up my work!

Thus, due to all this unnecessary stress that my dysfunctional computer has added to my life, I decided that I needed a little light humour to cheer me up. I also thought it would make a bit of a change to your usual NAG reading by lightening up a little, instead of getting all serious (like I usually do). Humour's the best medicine after all, and we all know there are far too many members of the NAG editorial staff that have forgotten to take theirs! What follows are the best computer jokes I know. Enjoy.

MURPHY'S LAWS OF COMPUTING:

1. When computing, whatever happens, behave as though you meant it to happen;
2. When you get to the point where you really understand your computer, it's probably obsolete;
3. The first place to look for information is in the section of the manual where you least expect to find it;
4. When the going gets tough, upgrade;
5. For every action, there is an equal and opposite malfunction;
6. To err is human. To blame your computer for your mistakes is downright natural;
7. He who laughs last probably made a backup;
8. If at first you do not succeed, blame your computer;
9. A complex system that doesn't work is invariably found to have evolved from a simpler system that worked perfectly; and
10. The number one cause of computer problems is computer solutions.

TOP TEN SIGNS YOU BOUGHT A BAD COMPUTER

1. Lower corner of screen has the words 'Etch-a-sketch' on it;
2. Its celebrity spokesman is Jacob Zuma;
3. In order to start it, you need some jumper cables and a friend's car;
4. Its slogan is "Pentium: redefining mathematics";
5. The 'quick reference' manual is 120 pages long;
6. Whenever you turn it on, all the dogs in your neighbourhood start howling;
7. The screen often displays the message, "Isn't it time for a break yet?";
8. The manual contains only one sentence: "Good Luck!";
9. The only chip inside is a Dorito; and

THE COMPUTER PRAYER

Our Hard Drive

Which art internal

Volume C by name;

Thy code be clean,

Thy fonts be seen

On screen as they

are on paper.

Give us this day our

documents,

And lead us not into

fragmentation

But deliver us our

data.

For thine is the SCSI,

And the EISA, and

the NuBus,

Forever and Ever,

Amen.

10. The CD-ROM drive's most useful function is acting as a coffee cup holder.

TEN WAYS TO AMUSE YOURSELF IN THE COMPUTER LAB:

1. Log on, wait a few seconds, get a frightened look on your face, scream "Oh my God! They've found me!" and bolt;
2. Type frantically, often stopping to look at the person next to you evilly;
3. Before anyone else is in the lab, connect each computer to a different screen than the one it's set up with;
4. Ask the person next to you if they know how to tap into top-secret Pentagon files;
5. Make a small ritual sacrifice to the computer before you turn it on;
6. Bring a chainsaw, but don't use it. If anyone asks why you have it, say "Just in case..." mysteriously;
7. Light candles in a pentagram around your terminal before starting;
8. Every time you press Return and there is processing time required, pray "Oh please, oh please, oh please," and scream "YES!" when it finishes;
9. If you're sitting in a swivel chair, spin around singing The Lion Sleeps Tonight whenever there is processing time required;
10. Print out the complete works of Shakespeare, then, when it's all done (about two days later), say that all you wanted was one line. **NAG**



The views and opinions cited in this column do not necessarily reflect those of NAG Magazine and its staff.

PG191

Indeed a Monitor Made for Gamers

Packs 2ms Response Time,
Powerful Bass Performance and
Video Communications into 1 Display



Aluminum-alloy base



Subwoofer box, 3 USB2.0
ports, microphone and
earphone jacks, and
SRS hotkey built-in

Hotkeys Quickly Activate Special Modes

The PG191 offers hotkeys to activate its special audio and video modes. Select the right modes to optimize your listening and visual experiences.

- Hotkey for 5 Sound Preset Mode Selections (Fighting Game, Strategic Game, Theater, Music, Standard)
- Hotkey for 5 Video Preset Mode Selections (Game, Night View, Theater, Scenery and Standard)
- Hotkey for activating and deactivating SRS TruSurround XT

Smooth and sharp images

TraceFree, an exclusive technology found only on ASUS monitors, accelerates gray-to-gray response time to 2ms. By getting rid of ghostings and tracers during games and movies, the PG191 provides smoother and clearer images. Another ASUS-developed feature is Splendid™ Video Intelligence Technology. It intelligently detects activation of graphics applications and dynamically fine tunes image color, brightness, sharpness and contrast for visual conditions most comfortable to the human eye. Splendid™ further offers five special modes (Standard, Game, Theater, Scenery and Night) that can be activated by a hotkey for different video usages.

Interactive gaming right out of the box

With the 1.3M-pixel built-in webcam and headphone and microphone jacks, the PG191 is a video conference center right out of the box. For online games that require teamwork and team strategies, the ASUS monitor is an ideal solution. The whole team no longer needs to get together at an Internet cafe to play games such as Counter Strike and Battle Field. Just turn on the webcam and plug in the headset and microphone, and you're ready to see and chat with teammates while gaming at the comfort of your home.

With great video and audio quality, interactive gaming capability built in and cool designs to give your system a new twist, the PG191 is indeed made for gamers.

I recently had the pleasure to play around with the new ASUS PG191 LCD monitor, which the company is marketing as a display tailored for the gaming community. I spent some time with it, and found several reasons why I think the PG191 is as good as advertised.

Jazz up your gaming system

Many avid players like to personalize their computers with light effects and stickers that match the games they are playing, and hence, the PG191 included themes of different game types into its designs.

- Alumium alloy neck that looks like a robotic arm. It has a Star Wars feel to it.
- Diamond-cut aluminum alloy base
- Monitor contour and glared panel frame are based on designs of stealth bomber
- Subwoofer box at back takes on the shape of a tank canon
- The stylish cover of subwoofer box looks like the alloy wheel of a race car.

Heart-thumpin' bass

Sound plays a big part in the whole gaming experience as well. The PG191 incorporated 2.1-channel audio, 10W satellite stereo speakers and the 15W ASUS Power Bass System, offering high-quality audio comparable to the best LCD TVs.

The monitor further adopted SRS TruSurround XT™ Technology to support Dolby™ and the latest game titles 5.1-and 6.1-channel sound standard. No more tangling cables and extra cost for additional speakers to blast music and game sound effects.



KINGPIN FLYING CARS IN A FLAWED FUTURE

By Michael James

IF YOU CAN'T FACE another hour of zombie bashing in *Dead Rising* or are just tired of watching your pet creature beating up skeletons in *Titan Quest* (it's okay, it happens to all of us occasionally), do yourself a favour and watch an old science fiction movie. Remember to bring along a big bag of popcorn, a box of tissues and an open mind. It really is fascinating stuff... real good solid fantasy in fact. I'm calling it fantasy because old science fiction might as well be pure fantasy. The odd concepts of future technology they used to have back then are intriguing enough to demand further study. The message that comes across loud and clear to me is that we're doomed to get it all wrong in terms of fictional writing concerning the future, because we're (speaking generally of the human race) incapable of predicting a future anywhere more than fifty years. This doesn't imply that we'll never see space ships like the Millennium Falcon in action over our skies one day, but instead of all the open space inside as depicted by George Lucas, it'll probably more likely be stuffed full of unhappy travellers eating bad food and fighting over luggage space. You see, it's not only the small details they get wrong, but also the bigger things. Notice how in old science fiction impressive technology is depicted as being much bigger. Clearly the more powerful the beam, weapon or computer, the bigger it must be... If Intel planned things like that, we'd all be living inside our computers by now. The idea in old science fiction was obviously that a powerful computer had to be big to be effective - the more flashing lights and odd beeping, the better. So how did we go from room-sized computers that can rule the world to a huge network of smaller computers that really rule the world?

I guess humans are the one variable in these fictional equations that nobody ever gets right. Science fiction thinking requires bigger is more powerful, but humans don't like carrying heavy objects around, so we demand that things get smaller and more functional. We're fascinated by compact mobility for some reason. We just can't get enough of tiny components and we must continually keep producing smaller and smaller devices. On the other side of the fence, this is why technology is so fascinating. It's always taking inspiration from the movies, but the interpretation and practical implementation of producing

IT'LL PROBABLY
MORE LIKELY BE
STUFFED FULL
OF UNHAPPY
TRAVELLERS
EATING BAD
FOOD AND
FIGHTING OVER
LUGGAGE SPACE



someone else's imagination and selling it to the masses needs a little refinement.

ESKOM

Thanks go to Eskom this month. Thank you Eskom for sending me my electricity bill five months after I have moved into my new house! Thanks for presenting a bill that has the potential to bankrupt a small country off the coast of who cares where. Lucky for me, I've been saving up money for this very moment, because I knew it was coming before I started wondering about where it was. I'm sure I heard that down in Cape Town the power was an issue a while ago, a big enough issue to reach Gauteng, and we only stop to listen to major global events because we're too busy running around killing ourselves with unnecessary work because we cling to old mail addresses. If Eskom cannot get me my first bill within five months of moving into a new place, it doesn't surprise me when the lights at my office go off for four hours on the odd occasion, killing a productive day of work for an excessively busy publishing company. I don't get angry anymore because I just think back to waiting five months to get a bill, and deep down inside, when my power goes off, I now know why it really happens. However, enough about Eskom, which is purely fictional, in case any lawyers are reading this.

LOOK NO WIRES!

A big thank you goes out this month to Tony Brown at Plantronics for arranging the coolest set of Bluetooth headphones I have ever used (Pulsar 590A in case you're wondering) - you haven't lived until you've used wireless headphones. Oh, also thanks to Regardt for actually putting the deal into action. This is what I meant when I said you'd be amply rewarded: my public acknowledgement of your existence. Go here for cool stuff www.plantronics.co.za. **NAG**

*** Disclaimer:** If anything negative was unintentionally mentioned about Cape Town, it was aimed at getting the point across. I really like the mountain because I don't see it every day, so when going on holiday it's still exciting.

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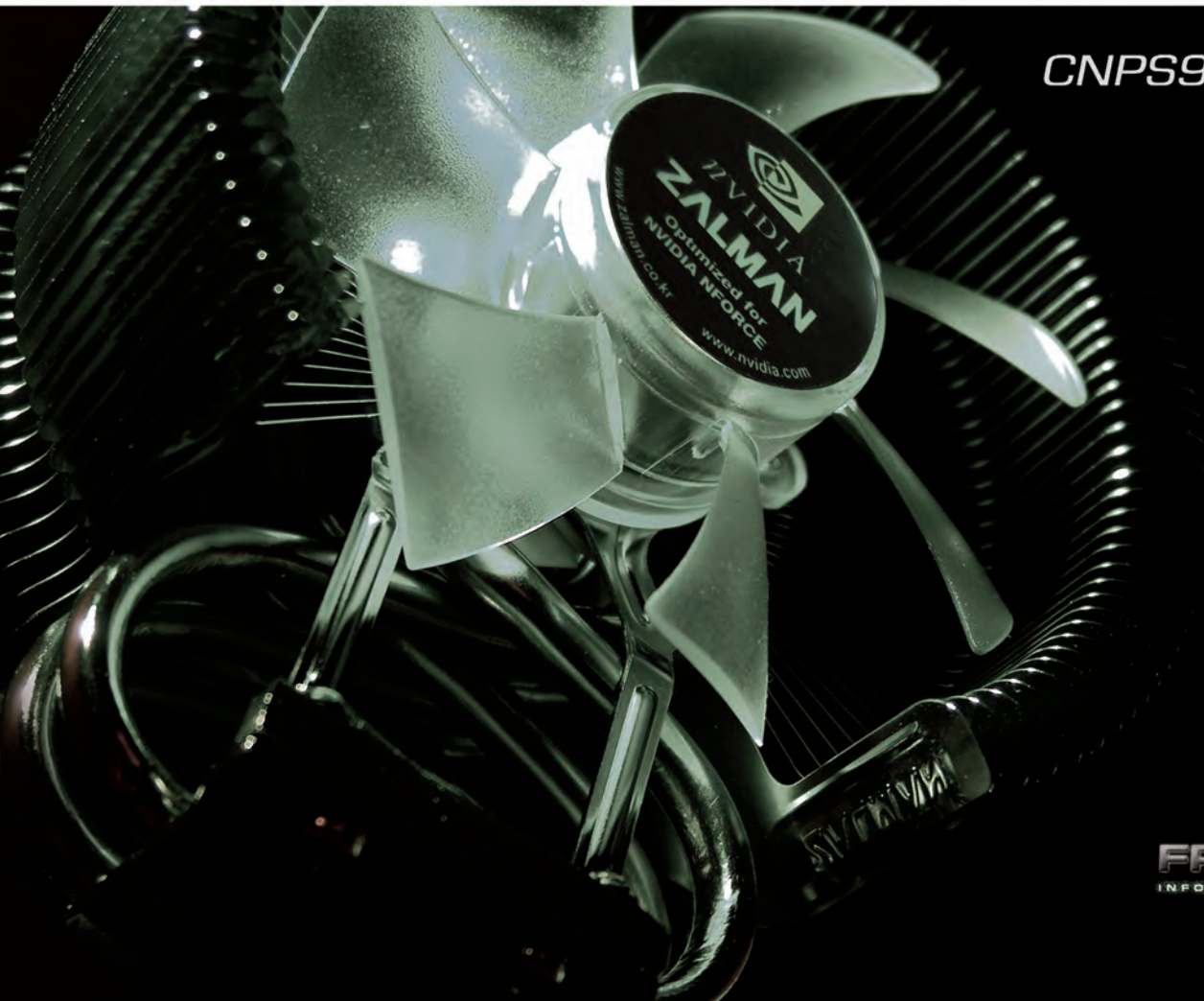


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Interview: The Tale of Two Dead Men

KANE & LYNCH DEAD MEN

Developer: IO Interactive

Publisher: Eidos Interactive

Distributor: WWE

Platforms: PC, 360

Genre: Action

Release: 2007

After gaining experience on *Hitman* and *Freedom Fighters*, developer IO Interactive is moving towards next-generation platforms with a new game that will incorporate action and tactics in a gritty world of mercenaries and psychopaths. *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* already looks promising in its concepts and design, and few fans complain about IO's ability to explore the tactical and action genres with fair amounts of originality. To find out what will be on offer, NAG spoke to Jens-Peter Kurup, the game's director, about what we can expect from this edgy title.



After four *Hitman* games, did you feel it was time for something new, or has *Kane & Lynch* been in planning for a while?

Kane & Lynch has been in the pipeline for quite some time. We were very keen for our next game to be very highly focused on story, so it took a while to come up with the right characters, setting and plot. In that time, we played many games and watched many movies to gain experience from some great material already out there. Now that we're far into the project, we're very excited about *Kane & Lynch*, and can't wait to let gamers into the gritty, realistic world we've created.

Who is working on the game? What did they work on in the past, and did you bring in any external talent for this project?

A good part of the team are ex-*Freedom Fighters* team members – not really because of the way IO is structured, but rather because *Kane & Lynch* relies on their expertise when it comes to creating instantly enjoyable gameplay and intuitive crew mechanics. This time around, though, we've scaled the team up considerably, both with people from the *Hitman* team and a lot of experienced talent from outside. It's a great mix that allows us to do

stuff we've never been able to do before.

Apart from *Hitman*, IO is known for *Freedom Fighters*. Is *Kane & Lynch* a spiritual successor to *Freedom Fighters* where fans of the latter will find a lot of familiarity?

Freedom Fighters is a game that we're very proud of. It still stands out as a benchmark, and we frequently have people asking us whether we'll be developing a sequel. I wouldn't say that *Kane & Lynch* is a successor to *Freedom Fighters* per se, but *Freedom Fighters* has been a huge influence on everyone at IO, and we've taken the basics from that game and developed an even better game in *Kane & Lynch*.

What is the central philosophy behind *Kane & Lynch*? Is it more cerebral or more action-focused?

It's a blend of both. The game has a fantastic story that we took a long time to create, and it's going to offer the player an immersive and very enjoyable experience. The gameplay is focused on action, so expect to be making tactical decisions while bullets and explosions are going off everywhere around you.



So far, the game appears to involve skyscrapers, nightclubs, street battles, Retomoto and a woman bound and gagged by the heroes. Can you elaborate on the story behind *Kane & Lynch*? Is the story being done internally?

Yes, the story was created internally. *Kane & Lynch* tells the story of two fallen characters: Kane, a mercenary, and Lynch, a medicated psychopath. Both are sent to Death Row for their crimes, where they meet at the start of the game. The surviving members of Kane's former mercenary group (called The7), who he left for dead on their last job, bust him and Lynch out of jail. They want the loot from that job and revenge on Kane for deserting them. Lynch has been contracted by the mercenaries to accompany Kane and ensure that he fulfills his side of the deal.

So far, the style of the game feels a lot like an edgy movie production. Is this where you are heading in terms of *Kane & Lynch*'s design?

Of course, we're also inspired by movies like *HEAT* and *Man on Fire*, and I guess it shows here and there. Actually, *Kane & Lynch* is a game that plays like *HEAT*, but with two main characters, both as disgruntled

as Denzel Washington in *Man on Fire*. Paying the game will be like taking the lead role in a dark and brooding Hollywood action movie.

The press release kicks off with a quote from the Bible. Is there a religious or supernatural side to the story?

I wouldn't necessarily say that there's either side in the game. What I would say, however, is that you do gain a sense of the despair and pain that the main characters are in because of the way that they are. They know they're bad, but they can't help it.

Who are the people in the orange overalls?

The people in the orange overalls are your squad members in one of the levels in the game.

***Kane & Lynch* will feature squad-based gameplay. Is this part of the game or the underlying system? Will there be times where the duo is out on their own?**

Yes, there is optional squad control in the game, so you can choose to control your crew of mercenaries. In parts of the game it will be just Kane and Lynch, while in others there will be a crew as well. You're





FREEDOM FIGHTERS

While IO Interactive is best known for its *Hitman* games, the studio was also responsible for *Freedom Fighters*, a 2003 tactical squad shooter released on the PlayStation 2 and PC. Making use of a modified *Hitman* engine, the game is largely credited with bringing squad shooters to the masses. It used a basic interface to control squad members with, and used a Charisma gauge to prompt players into doing heroic (and sometimes plain suicidal) deeds. Charisma, in turn, helped with the control and recruitment of squad members. The game played off in an alternative version of history where Russia ended World War II by dropping a nuke on Berlin, and taking over most of the world. Players took the role of a plumber in New York City who was pulled into the resistance when his brother was arrested by the Russian military.

The game averaged 81% on *Gamerankings.com*, and fans have been hoping for a sequel ever since. Publisher Eidos did announce a sequel in 2004, but the project was shelved in order to work on *Kane & Lynch*.





thrown into some pretty dangerous and volatile situations and the crew is needed for some of them, even though hired mercenaries are not always reliable!

The next-generation means, among other things, more detail and larger levels. How large are the levels in *Kane & Lynch*? Considering the tactical nature of the game, how restricted will players be while moving around in game worlds?

The levels in this game are huge, and that's one of the real selling points of this game. For example, in one level set in Tokyo, you start on top of a huge skyscraper, rappel 50 floors down to a boardroom, kill the occupants of the room, fight your way out through the building's lobby and then engage in a massive gunfight in the streets as you try to escape. Therefore, you can see we're offering a very diverse and constantly changing game world in which players can move about at their leisure. There are also multiple ways to complete the levels in this game, so that gives you some idea of the freedom we're offering our players.

Recently there have been several games that approached squad-games different to each other.

Apart from your own work, what else is lending inspiration to this project?

For this project, our inspiration has mainly been movies, although we were hugely impressed with the recent game *Fahrenheit*, which took game storytelling and concept to a completely new level. In *Kane & Lynch*, the story and characters are quite unique, but some of the style and mood has been inspired by films such as *HEAT*, *Man on Fire*, *Clear and Present Danger*, *Miami Vice* and *Black Hawk Down*.

The game will apparently be heavily populated and very destructible. What level of action, violence and destruction can players expect?

You shoot it and it's going to fall apart. *Kane & Lynch* is going to feature an unparalleled destructible environment. If you're hiding behind a pillar, bullets will shear the concrete away till the metal struts beneath remain. Different types of cover will last for different lengths of time. For example, a decorative glass cabinet won't last as long as an upturned metal desk. In *Kane & Lynch*, choosing your cover wisely will make a difference between success and failure. The game environment will also be heavily populated, so for example, in one level you have to navigate your way out of a packed nightclub while being attacked by a series of armed guards.



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Will the game support co-op play as suggested in the press release?

In the single-player mode, Kane is under direct control and Lynch is handled through the squad control mechanism (or through AI if you choose not to use the squad controls). In cooperative play, however, Lynch is handled directly by the second player. The reason that Kane is given slightly more focus is that he is definitely the more professional and skilfully trained of the two. Story-wise, there is perhaps more focus on Kane, but it's marginal. We would like to think that two players playing in co-op mode would feel that they are both experiencing the story from their characters' point of view.

Are there any plans yet for online play and features?

I can't reveal any of the gameplay goals for our

online multiplayer. It's hugely innovative and something you will never have seen before.

However, that's all I can say at this stage, so I hope you understand that we want to keep it under wraps until we're closer to release. Suffice to say, it's going to be a hugely popular title online. Co-op is offline only.

Any plans yet for the soundtrack?

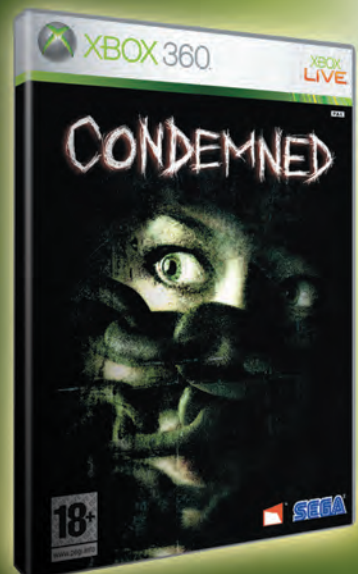
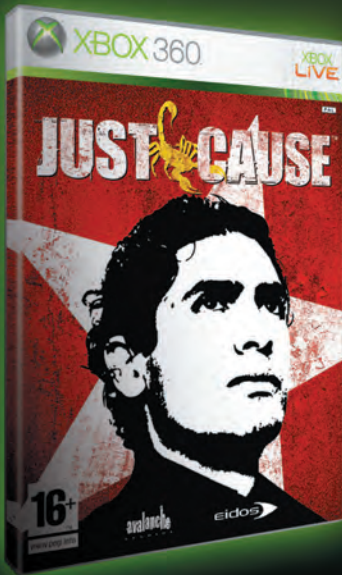
As yet, no, but we're due to start working on the soundtrack in the near future. It will tie-in seamlessly with what's on screen, so expect it to be suitably dark and brooding.

Does this mean there won't be another *Hitman* game?

I can't confirm or deny this. Suffice to say, I very much doubt that's the last you'll ever see of Agent 47. **NAG**



GET READY TO PLAY!!





GAMES CONVENTION LEIPZIG, GERMANY

EA South Africa recently invited NAG to the Games Convention in Leipzig, Germany. This was partly for some exclusive interviews (Gabe Newel and Will Wright) and a closer look at some of their upcoming titles (*Spore*, *Command & Conquer 3*, *Crysis* and *Need of Speed: Carbon* to name a few), and to evaluate the convention as an alternative to E3 from a gaming magazine point of view.



THE ALL NEW E3

Here's a little background information for those of you who don't already know. E3 has effectively collapsed under its own weight, and has been refashioned from a gaudy extravaganza of noise, booth babes and thousands of annoying visitors, into something much smaller. The current thinking, based on a combination of speculation and announcements from the ESA (www.theesacom), indicate that instead of filling up the entire LA Convention Centre, E3 will be held in July (instead of May, apparently rescheduled to give

developers more time to work on their games), and will basically involve smaller, more intimate (by invitation only) press functions in a few hotels scattered around Los Angeles.

We'll keep you updated on the all-new E3 in the next few months once the organisers and gaming industry people figure out what it is they'll be doing. Part of the reason for the collapse of E3 was cost versus benefit from an exhibitor perspective, as well as

news that the big players (Electronic Arts, PlayStation and Microsoft) were not prepared to keep spending the millions of dollars it required to build those monolithic stands and staff them. Depending on what is announced and passed onto us by our local distributors, NAG is evaluating the viability of covering E3 in 2007 versus attending the Games Convention in Germany, or simply a combination of both. The current thinking leans towards attending the new-look E3 in 2007, regardless of what it might be, and then see if it warrants future visits, and then definitely visiting Germany each year to cover the Games Convention.

GAMES CONVENTION GERMANY

Therefore, this brings us to the Games Convention in Leipzig. The recent E3 announcements have a number of local companies wondering if the German gaming convention is a better option than E3 in terms of press coverage and business expansion. One important difference between E3 and the Games Convention is consumer attendance. E3 is strictly an industry event (although public attendance was at an all-time high in 2006), while Games Convention has one industry day and four consumer days. It seems that game publishers like the idea of showing off their latest and greatest to the game buying public instead of hordes of industry people, other exhibitors and the handful of gamers who manage to sneak into E3 each year. This makes sense. Why



GAMES CONVENTION 2006 FACTS AND FIGURES

- According to surveys conducted by the IM Institute of Market Research, 42% of visitors were aged over 20 – an increase of 6% compared to last year. Seventeen percent of visitors were female (up by 4%), and 90% of all visitors said that they'd be back. Altogether, 39% of visitors travelled more than 300km to attend GC (up from 31% last year);
- GC 2006 also clearly hit the headlines with more than 2,600 journalists from 38 countries (2005: 2,000 journalists from 26 countries) travelling to Leipzig to report on GC; and
- Ninety-one percent of the total of 368 exhibitors from 25 countries announced before GC closed that they would be returning to take part in GC 2007. Moreover, when asked how well their aims had been achieved at the show, 89% of exhibitors replied either 'well' or even 'very well' (up from 86% in 2005).



RIGHT: The convention centre is massive. This is the 'glass hall' that connects three of the five huge exhibition halls

BELOW: Some of the 183,000 gamers who attended the show



RIGHT: It may not be E3, but it still looks a little like E3



not court and impress the people who are actually buying your games, instead of wasting millions of dollars on industry people who probably haven't bought a game in years (especially cynical and jaded industry journalists who've long since forgotten how to actually enjoy games anymore)? Therefore, consumer shows are in and industry events are out. This line of thinking bodes especially well for rAge (South Africa's own gaming convention). Fortunately, from the inaugural rAge in 2003 it was decided by the organisers to make rAge a gaming expo that encompasses all aspects of the gaming business (games, hardware, retail and competitive events) – a decision largely arrived at by the limited size of the industry in this country. Adding a LAN to rAge further boosted its popularity, and the rAge 2006 1,200-man LAN was sold out within a month of the tickets going on sale.

Consumer attendance is clearly a big quality for the newer gaming conventions. Even Sony tapped this approach with its 'Playstation experience' roadshows.

DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?

Not being able to speak or read the language in a foreign country is a challenge. Thankfully, a firm grasp of Afrikaans and having watched all the *James Bond* movies provided a much-needed edge. The host city, Leipzig, is famous for Europe's largest monument, and from our perspective, for hosting the Games Convention (GC). This

MARTIN BACHMAYER, MICROSOFT HEAD OF SALES & MARKETING: "SO FAR, GC HAS BEEN A GREAT SUCCESS FOR US. WE'VE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS THE GAMES AND ACCESSORIES FOR THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD WITH ALL OUR DEALERS. MOREOVER, WE'VE MANAGED TO DO BUSINESS WITH THE MAIN DECISION-MAKERS, BUSINESSES AND INDIVIDUAL BRANCHES, AND HAVE MADE GREAT HEADWAY."

year, the event attracted over 183,000 visitors including 2,600 journalists from 38 countries. According to Josef Rahmen, CEO of the Leipzig Fair, "Success on this scale is unique ever since the Leipzig Fair's new exhibition centre was opened ten years ago. GC has clearly demonstrated that it's the European number one, not just among the general public, but also in the media and business sector, making it one of the leading events in the industry anywhere in the world."

The show itself is very similar to E3 – plenty of stands, plenty of people and plenty of noise. Europe, however, does tend to go more for elegance and style over the gaudy in-your-face glitzy slap E3 delivers. It's less of an assault on the senses, and judging on stand size and design, a lot more economical. All the big players were present and accounted for, including a large number of companies better known in Germany. Microsoft and Nintendo put on the usual press conferences, while Sony played things a little more subtly, eliciting a little negativity from the attending press. From a gaming press point of

view, the real substance of the show was to be found in limited access meeting rooms where all the latest updates on games initially shown at E3 could be played and discussed. The number of key industry people available for meetings was astonishing – a clear indication that everyone is taking Games Convention seriously and things are looking very good for the event in 2007. NAG managed to talk to Gabe Newel and Will Wright about their latest projects. The Gabe Newel interview will appear in the November issue of NAG and just a few pages further on you can read all about *Spore* and enjoy our exclusive interview with its creator.

As for next year, if you start saving money now, you might even be able to take a trip to Germany and see this event for yourself. Other than that, we're trying to arrange a trip for a lucky NAG reader to come with us to Germany in 2007. So keep reading – you never know. GC 2007 will take place from 23 to 26 August, so you can expect something big in the October 2007 issue of NAG. Until then: *Auf Wiedersehen...*

GAMES CONVENTION PREVIEW

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

IN MAY 2006 AT E3, certain members of the media were shown a very brief glimpse of *Tiberium Wars*. It was more of a sequence of videos than any real hardcore game action to be honest. The game certainly looked good then, but somehow the showing was a little disappointing, leaving the gaming press of the world wanting. Fast forward to August 2006, at the Games Convention in Leipzig. *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* was on show behind closed doors and NAG witnessed some actual playing of the game: a short mission where the GDI clobbered seven shades of green out of a small NOD outpost. It's looking like nothing you've ever seen before in the *Command & Conquer* universe, but at the same time, it feels distinctly familiar right down to the voice recognition when clicking on a mammoth tank. This updated code further highlights and sanctifies one of the reasons why E3 has fallen out of favour with many publishers and developers. It's just too early in the year for development teams to put on a good showing with new titles, and considering the major leap that *Tiberium Wars* has made from May to August, it's easy to see what they're talking about.

WELCOME BACK, COMMANDER

It's 2047. The series is returning to its roots. *Tiberium* is back and more prolific than ever before, NOD and GDI are still at each other's throats, and the world of RTS gaming as you know it is about to get a kick up the butt. Tiberium, the alien crystalline material featured in the original *Command & Conquer* game (also referred to as *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Dawn*), has almost consumed or is in the process of consuming most of the planet. The world of *Tiberium Wars* is divided into zones, red, yellow and blue, each representing the severity of Tiberium infestation. The red zones are completely uninhabitable by humans, while the blue zones are still untouched by the ravages of Tiberium – these blue zones also represent the last vestiges of the civilised world. The yellow zones (partially habitable) are where most of the action takes place. These partial disaster areas form the backdrop to the ongoing war between the GDI (Global Defense Initiative) and the

Brotherhood of NOD.

The big news is that Kane is back (*Command & Conquer* veterans will be pleased to know that Kane will be played by Joseph D. Kucan, from the original game, and *Tiberium Wars* will feature real live action movies linking some of the missions together). The basic premise behind the game is that the Brotherhood of NOD is waging war against the GDI for control of the blue zones. The developers have previously hinted that a third race, most likely alien, would form part of the game. Just a quick retake on the story elements involved here. We have live action video featuring real actors and we're sure with the EA wallet flapping about on this one we can expect some big surprises. We have a scientific white paper on Tiberium prepared by real university scientific types. There's a third race involved in this game, rumoured to be alien in nature, and we have Kane. Now, if you take all the years of maturity, history, lore and enthusiasm surrounding this project, and add the right people developing it, you've got yourself one hell of a story for an RTS game – one that will

probably knock your socks off and blow your hair right the way back.

REAL TIME STRATEGY

There's always some debate regarding who invented the RTS genre, but the bottom line is that Westwood studios brought it to the masses with *Command & Conquer*. The original game was a genre-defining masterpiece that is still celebrated today by the more diehard of fans. In the series, we've seen an alternative history storyline with Red Alert, and more recently, the *Generals* series kept us busy killing each other. There has even been a first-person shooter game based on the franchise, not their greatest moment, but it was passable when it was released. Over ten years the series has evolved significantly since the original, but the leap in technology represented by *Tiberium Wars* will be a significant milestone. The thinking behind this new game is as an update to the original, so don't expect anything significant in terms of everything that we've seen come and go since the original game. This is exactly what the majority of fans are looking for – a modern day version of *Command & Conquer* minus any bells and whistles copied

"WE HAVE BEEN WAITING TO REVEAL THIS GAME FOR QUITE SOME TIME AND ARE THRILLED TO BRING THE SERIES BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN. THE *TIBERIUM* UNIVERSE IS A PERSONAL FAVOURITE OF MINE, AND THIS SAGA'S NEW DIRECTION WILL PROVE TO BE A WORTHY ADDITION TO ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED RTS FRANCHISES."

LOUIS CASTLE
VP OF CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT AT EA LOS ANGELES (EALA) AND CO-FOUNDER OF WESTWOOD STUDIOS, CREATOR OF THE *COMMAND & CONQUER* SERIES

from strategy games released during the last ten years. The control interface is the same, the icons are the same and the game plays exactly like the original. There are some refinements here and there, but the focus is directly on the experience, and it was quite startling to see the game in action, sounding and feeling exactly how you might remember it. Despite the radical graphical update, it looks similar too, with particular reference to structures like the Hand of NOD and the mighty Mammoth Tanks.

At the Games Convention, we were shown a short mission from the GDI perspective, doing what they do best... pounding the tar out of NOD. Naturally, the graphics have received a major overhaul and it's quite amusing to play the original now with its tiny sprites and two-dimensional presentation.

Some things we noticed from the short presentation are that Engineers will capture a building any time regardless of damage status. The Obelisk of Light features in the game and is still as devastating as ever. One concern was that the level of zoom was a little too close, not leaving much of the battlefield on view. But considering the vast array of settings that come with modern games, this shouldn't be too hard to fix. *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* almost sounds like it was partially kicked along by the passion of the extensive community fan base, as the developers doing the presentation kept talking about what the fans wanted and mentioned forums and Websites that they visit on a regular basis looking for general sentiment on what the gaming community wants the next *Command & Conquer* game to be. Good news for everyone.



TANYA, WE MISS YOU

Another focus for the team is multiplayer. They've developed a spectator mode and hope that through their innovations and the growing popularity of gaming, *Tiberium Wars* will add more weight to the argument that games like this can be a real spectator sport. Besides spectator modes, they've added voice into the mix as well as user commentary, but as with everything in the multiplayer arena, prediction is nigh impossible and always boils down to

how well the community adopts the toys on offer. The good news is that *Tiberium Wars* is looking like everything its loyal fan base is hoping for. The bad news... you're going to have to wait until next year to get your hands on this exciting new RTS experience. It is scheduled for public release in early 2007, so until then, you can keep yourself occupied by playing all the old games in the series in *Command & Conquer: The First Decade*.



LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND SPORE

WILL WRIGHT INTERVIEW

Spore will change the way you think about user-created content in games, and might even give you a new philosophical appreciation for the universe. Bold words indeed, but considering the pedigree, entirely plausible. The game takes players from the origin and evolution of life right into the deepest reaches of space, as they conquer or trade among the stars in a universe populated with the creations of thousands of other gamers from around the world. The game also employs some exciting new ideas such as procedural animation where your creatures and vehicles move based on how you designed them using the game's powerful, but fun editing tools. NAG went to Germany to secure an interview with one of the true gods of gaming, creator of *The Sims* and the brain behind *Spore*, Will Wright.



How do you go from *The Sims* to *Spore*? What was the incubation period for this game, and how long have you been thinking about it?

Will Wright: I started thinking about it right around the time we finished the first *Sims*. That's when I did the very early research on it, and it took about two years of research before I started doing some early prototyping of it. I was looking at how to take player creativity to the next level. I saw people doing really creative things with *The Sims*, and I was wondering if we could create tools that could result in even more creative output for less creative input. I also thought about how to take the creative stuff the players were making and move it around transparently, so the players didn't have to go to Websites. It would all happen automatically as part of the game.

There has been a lot of talk about the technology that has been created that is unique to this title. Do you have insights on this?

Will Wright: Some of it has been very hard, and some of it was surprisingly easy given what we were doing. We didn't know how far we could go on certain things. The animation was very hard and we started that very early. Procedural texturing

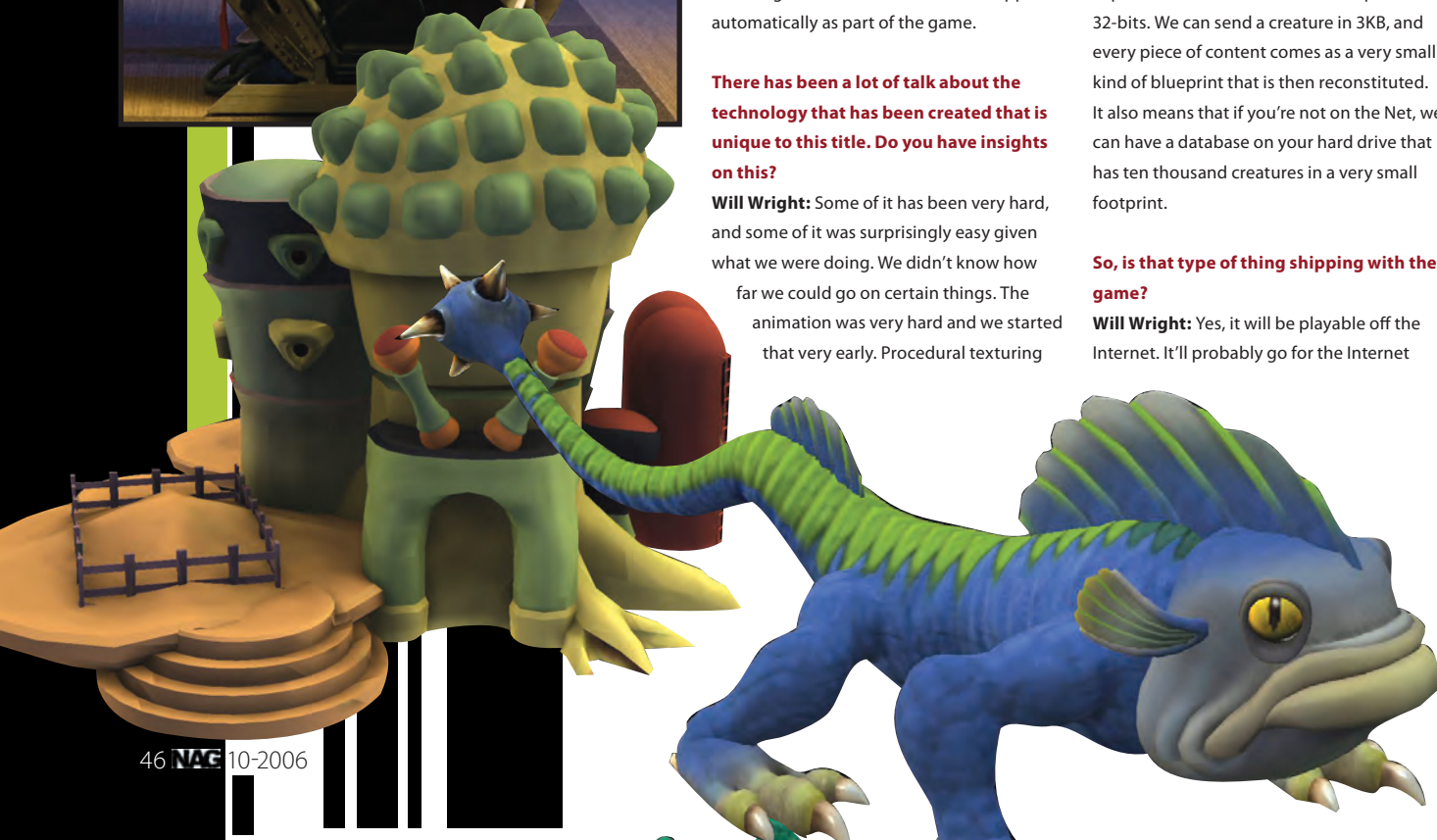
ended up being fairly easy and we're still looking at how to do more and more stuff procedurally in the game, so the planets are all generated procedurally as well. Almost every bit of content has some procedural basis, but it depends on what kind of content you're talking about.

What is the limitation on the size of the game?

Will Wright: Well, the fact is because it's procedural, it all compresses very highly, so a creature in memory is about 3MB to 5MB like it would be for any game character. However, it compresses to about 3KB, and the part we're sending over the Net is a very tiny little genome. It's like the genome of the creature, we add water on the client, and we can expand it so we can send an entire planet in 32-bits. We can send a creature in 3KB, and every piece of content comes as a very small kind of blueprint that is then reconstituted. It also means that if you're not on the Net, we can have a database on your hard drive that has ten thousand creatures in a very small footprint.

So, is that type of thing shipping with the game?

Will Wright: Yes, it will be playable off the Internet. It'll probably go for the Internet



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connection first. If it's not connected to the Net, it'll pull from the local drive, but it will prefer the database on the Net, and that way, every time you play the game, you'll see different stuff. It'll never be the same stuff twice.

Your games are renowned for their ambiguity in terms of winning and losing.

How do you make sure that that remains core? Is there a rule set you use?

Will Wright: Well it's not really a rule set. The levels in *Spore* have very definite goal structures. To get out of the evolution game I have to get intelligence. To get out of the civilisation game I have to conquer the world. However, once you get to space, it gets much more open-ended, so space is the most open-ended portion of *Spore*. Within evolution, there's a wide variety of strategies. You can choose to be a very sneaky carnivore or social herbivore or whatever, so we have a wide number of ways to get out of evolution. However, for the most part, I want the players to be as creative as possible, not just in what they make in the game, but also in how they play it.

What is one question you haven't been asked that you'd like to answer?

Will Wright: That's a good question. Well, I could probably give you a better answer. I think probably more what I want players to take away from *Spore*. I want the players to really feel creative when they play this game, to the point where they make things that they are really proud of. I want them to have a perspective on the universe and life's role in the universe because *Spore* is about the complete history of life and the future of life, stepping way back and seeing the whole big picture.

So it's educational.

Will Wright: In a perspective way, it isn't like I'm trying to teach them about science so much, but I want them to have an almost drug-induced epiphany - a philosophical appreciation for the universe.

What are your thoughts on the GTA sandbox style of game?

Will Wright: I think *GTA* is a brilliant game design. I don't spend a lot of time playing it. Although I never do the missions, what I enjoy doing is walking around the world and finding a bicycle and learning bicycle tricks and stuff like that, and that's what I love about that game. I don't have to play the game through the missions. I can ignore that and just play with the world.

Has anything really inspired you since the original idea for Spore? Have you recently seen anything that has changed what you may have done? What has really impressed you in terms of games in the last year?

Will Wright: I was impressed with *Guitar Hero* and *Brain Age*, mostly in terms of the way non-gamers would relate to those games. I was amazed, seeing people who don't play games getting into *Guitar Hero* or *Brain Age*. I think you can get general lessons from things like that. Like *Guitar Hero*, when people play one song correctly they get this deep sense of pride - like 'wow', I did that correctly. Those games make you feel that you're actually good at the task and they reinforce your self-esteem. I think games should make people feel better about themselves and not worse. Most games, like your hardcore games, are too hard. It's a stick instead of a carrot and I think the carrot is what will attract more people to gaming.

Episodic content comments.

Will Wright: Episodic content is a pretty open-ended thing. I mean, we can look at the expansion packs for *The Sims* as kind of episodic content. Episode isn't quite the right word though, because it isn't like a story. I think that games should be expandable. *Spore* is expandable as you explore the world, and in games like *The Sims*, you have expansion packs.

With the Sim City genre expanding into different things like Tycoon games and that sort of thing, where do you see the genre going in the next four years?

Will Wright: I thought about how we might take parts of *Spore* and leverage those into something like *Sim City* as creativity tools, and then make *Sim City* creative at a deeper level. For example, in *Sim City* the most interesting thing about it was the elaborate buildings, which the player didn't create - the player just placed them. I think we'll probably see those games allowing the player a deeper level of creativity in the future.

Were you surprised with the success of The Sims?

Will Wright: I was... I thought *The Sims* would either be a pretty big hit or a major flop, but I didn't think it would be as big a hit as it was. It ended up appealing to a much wider group of people than I thought. Not just young people, but housewives and grandmothers playing with their daughters.

Last one; will the creature editor end up being released on the Internet as a demo of sorts?

Will Wright: Probably. **NAG**



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PREVIEWS

PLAY HOW YA LIKE

THIS MONTH, RATHER THAN looking at games we at NAG would like, we are looking at concepts and ideas we would like to see more of in gaming instead. Currently, videogames have reached another superficial apex, where the only things newsworthy seem to be increased graphical fidelity, higher budgets or more voice actors. However, there are a few concepts that are really noteworthy, such as the ability of next-generation hardware to support large armies, vast terrain to explore, and so forth. Yet, the advancement of technology seems to have left a few important things behind, such as cooperative gameplay. Inversely, many unnecessary ideas have suddenly hit prime time, such as the superfluous ability to create a custom character, right down to the shape of the nose. There are many, many things we would like to see return in gaming, or to be expanded upon. Below are the five most prudent examples we could think of, without really straining ourselves.



BROKEN SWORD: THE ANGEL OF DEATH

DEVELOPER: Revolution **PUBLISHER:** THQ **PLATFORM:** PC **GENRE:** Adventure **RELEASE DATE:** October 2006

THE ADVENTURES OF GEORGE Stobart have been so popular that *Broken Sword* creator Charles Cecil couldn't keep his promise that there would only be three games in the series. As such, everyone's favourite ancient mystery investigator is back, though at the beginning of the game he finds himself jobless in New York and at a low point in his life. Things liven up soon though, with the arrival of a mysterious woman called Anna Maria. Unfortunately, that is all that is known about the plot in *Broken Sword 4* at this moment, but a few other pieces of info have surfaced. The mechanics of George uncovering some form of ancient conspiracy is still there, as well as the 3D approach introduced in the third game. Traditionalists will be glad to hear that a point-and-click interface will be present, though keyboard controls can also still be used. The focus is much more on adventuring and creative puzzles. The script is apparently the richest yet in the series. Unfortunately, console players won't get an opportunity to experience it, as *Angel of Death* will be a PC exclusive.



SCOOBY DOO! WHO'S WATCHING WHO?

DEVELOPER: THQ
PUBLISHER: THQ
PLATFORM: PSP, DS
GENRE: Adventure
RELEASE DATE: November 2006

SCOOBY DOO! WHERE ARE you? On the PSP and DS, soon enough, as this series just doesn't seem to end. Clearly, generations past, present and future enjoy watching hipsters and hippies scurry around to uncover hauntings across the US, which is good news since that's exactly what the gang's up to this time. Mystery Inc. are invited to take part in a reality show about ghost hunting, but they have rivals in the more sophisticated and loud-mouthed Ghost Scene Investigators (GSI), who frown at Mystery Inc.'s unscientific methods. Apparently, screaming "Yikes!" and running to hide in a barrel don't cut it with the pros. Therefore, the competition is on and Mystery Inc. will travel the whole of the US to solve more hauntings than GSI. The game will give fans many different opportunities to play with the iconic cast of characters, so there will be different game styles, ranging from platforming to puzzles. We're not sure if this is exciting, but the game will also give fans the first chance to drive the Mystery Machine, the flower-adorned van that takes Scooby and company around the place.

INDEX

52	Supreme Commander	[PC]
54	Sonic the Hedgehog	[PS3 ■ 360]
56	Call of Juarez	[PC]
58	Sam & Max	[PC]
60	Destroy All Humans! 2	[PS2]
62	Mortal Kombat Armageddon	[PS2]
64	Saints Row	[360]
66	The Godfather: Mob Wars	[PSP]
68	Hospital Tycoon	[PC]
70	Assassin's Creed	[PC ■ PS3 ■ 360]
72	The Darkness	[PC ■ 360]
74	Paraworld	[PC]
76	Just Cause	[PC ■ 360 ■ PS2 ■ XBOX]
78	The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass	[DS]
78	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin	[DS]

WHAT WE WANT...



MORE ENEMIES

Games such as *Dead Rising* and *Ninety-Nine Nights* are leading this charge, originally started by the likes of *Dynasty Warriors*, various Japanese shoot-'em-ups, as well as the *Kingdom Under Fire* series for the Xbox. However, are 1,000 onscreen zombies really enough? Armies of hundreds of archers and warriors barrelling down a hill - sure, it's nice, but it's just not there yet. We don't mind if the thousands of enemies are stupid as dirt - quantity has a quality all of its own.



MORE FREEFORM

Emergent gameplay was made ever popular by *Grand Theft Auto*, while games such as *Saints Row* and *Just Cause* mimic in their own unique ways. Despite its popularity, *GTA* titles just don't roll along often enough, and there are many speculations as to why. Regardless, freeform gameplay could do with more, bigger and better - though, naturally, not all *GTA* clones need to involve kicking dead hookers.



MEDAL OF HONOR: HEROES

DEVELOPER: EA
PUBLISHER: EA South Africa
PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: TBA

WAR! WHAT IS IT good for? Absolutely nothing! Well, when Edwin Starr sang his classic, he never thought about the lucrative market for war shooters. Running around the battlefields of the twentieth century has become a popular pastime, and it has been claimed that more time has been spent in WWII shooters than in the actual war itself. One of the originators of the genre is without a doubt *Medal of Honor*, and while the series still has to return to its former glory, there is no shortage of games. The most recent announcement is *Medal of Honor: Heroes*, a new PSP title for war shooter fans. Nevertheless, while the PSP game will feature all-new missions, the three characters that can be played are taken from the first games, *Allied Assault*, *Breakthrough* and *European Assault*. The action takes place in the Netherlands (Market Garden), the Ardennes Forest (Battle of the Bulge) and the coast of Italy. Wireless features will also present multiplayer for seven players locally and up to thirty-two online.



CASH MONEY CHAOS

DEVELOPER: Sony
PUBLISHER: Sony
PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: Q1 2007

WE LIKE GAMES THAT explain their core in their name. If a game called 'Kill Monsters and Set Fire to their Corpses' was to be released, we'd get it. *Cash Money Chaos* might not be too descriptive, but the essence is there: expect Chaos while you make Money and Cash. Maybe the name should be shortened to 'Cash Chaos'. The game will be very familiar to older gamers who played *Smash TV*. The concept is virtually the same: players take part in a game show where they get prizes, while mauling down swarms of creatures trying to stop them. The game's fifty levels will be broken up into ten seasons of this show. The developer promises 'infinite replayability', so there is probably a factor of randomisation with the enemy spawns. Like *Smash TV* and *Geometry Wars*, players will have a top-down view and be able to fire in all directions. This type of game obviously allows for some chaotic action onscreen and in *Cash Money Chaos*, players can expect many powerful weapons, not to mention hordes of monsters ranging from ninjas and hillbillies, to pirates and aliens.



BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY

DEVELOPER: DICE
PUBLISHER: EA South Africa
PLATFORM: 360, PS3
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: 2007

DON'T SHED A TEAR for co-op play. The feature, almost lost in the fog of the nineties, is making a strong resurgence, mainly thanks to the prolific growth of online play amongst console titles. Many games recently employed the feature, and people certainly enjoy playing with their friends instead of against them. At the same time, DICE, custodian of the *Battlefield* series, has to look into new ideas and avenues. What the developer has done so far isn't far from the original *Battlefield* or its predecessor, *Codename: Eagle*. Nevertheless, *Bad Company* is a co-op game where two soldiers, out for gold and other wartime riches, set off to enrich themselves. Using DICE's latest engine, the game boasts 90% destructibility and is aimed as a new experience within the larger *Battlefield* universe. Developed exclusively for the 360 and PS3, DICE is clearly aiming for extensive co-op play online. Hopefully it will herald a new branch in the franchise for DICE.



CANNON FODDER

DEVELOPER: Codemasters
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: Strategy
RELEASE DATE: 2007



A FEW YEARS AGO (1993), Sensible Software released the first *Cannon Fodder*, complete with the tag line, 'War has never been so much fun'. It only had one sequel, but many ports to other systems, as well as a few stabs at its revival. Since buying Sensible in 1999, Codemasters has been at work resurrecting some of the studio's classic titles. The recent *Sensible Soccer* is one example, and the publisher also released *Cannon Fodder* on mobile phones. Now, a PSP version of the game is planned, taking it back to its roots. The familiar top-down style of the original is in place, along with those huge heads of the 'fresh meat' signing up at the recruitment office. In *Cannon Fodder*, players will take charge of squads of soldiers, navigating them around a play area to achieve mission objectives. Teams can be split and complementing the machine guns they pack, arms caches with rockets and grenades are also in the war zone. Soldiers who survive get their stats such as accuracy upgraded, but they are called fodder for a reason. Hopefully the same dark humour will be back to entertain us again.



PROCEDURAL SYNTHESIS

It will take Will Wright to finally plug this hole in the gaming market, with his upcoming *Sim-everything Spore*. Using procedural synthesis, *Spore* is able to generate worlds, fauna, flora and even the animations that drive them through the black magic of numbers, formulas and equations. It's all spooky stuff in a way, but the benefits are clear: games can have more variety and scope, without killing hundreds of artists and animators in the process.



COOPERATIVE

There is no better way to experience *Cyberdemon* from the original *Doom* than with a few friends who are all running around in-game like headless chickens, being taken out by rockets one by one. If gaming is love, then naturally the best thing to do is to share it. At the risk of sounding like a hippy, cooperation just works better than competition. Now if only developers would bring back the heyday of multiplayer gaming by giving us cooperative multiplayer again. If it was good enough for *Contra*, it's good enough for any next-generation title.



CHARACTERS, NOT CREATION

Monopoly has one constant: Everyone wants to be the racecar. Having a set group of predesigned characters may seem confining, but as *Micro Machines* proved, it's just that much more familiar. For some reason, however, almost every game that involves a character now gives you the ability to customise your character, right down to ear shapes and facial features. Does all that really matter, except to the extremely self-conscious? Rather have a set of funny, original characters (i.e. Rockstar's *Table Tennis*), and make sure at least one of them has a ponytail.



SUPREME COMMANDER

Developer: Gas Powered Games Publisher: THQ Distributor: WWE Genre: Strategy Platforms: PC Release: 2007

JUST OVER A YEAR ago (September '05) we took our first look at *Supreme Commander*, the spiritual successor to *Total Annihilation*. Since E3, the hype around this game has been thick and steady, especially as successive videos demonstrated larger and larger amounts of units taking each other on in large battles. Fans of the original will recall that one of *Total Annihilation*'s mechanics involved large armies and aggressive tactics, since there wasn't such a thing as a weapon that's too big. If the Big Berthas or Nukes didn't get you, the swarms of mechanical units would (not to mention an untimely self-destructing Commander near a fusion plant). From this point of view alone, *Supreme Commander*

sounds more than inviting. In fact, the main complaint about the game so far is from PC gamers bemoaning another inevitable upgrade. Yes, the engine is claimed to scale nicely, but who wants this game to look ugly. In addition, with maps that will be kilometres across, one has to wonder what is meant by 'scalable'.

To recap, *Supreme Commander* is aimed to be the ultimate in strategy. Chris Taylor, creator of *Total Annihilation* and *Dungeon Siege*, feels that strategy is hardly a big factor in today's RTS. There are many tactics, but for most players it's about getting forces out fast and hard through aggressive resource gathering, sending them *en masse* to the

enemy locations. The first element in this game that subverts that is its sheer scale. You'd be hard-pressed to find any strategy game that comes close to *Supreme Commander*'s size. One of the main points the developer wanted to focus on is the relative scale of the units themselves. Some are truly massive with cannons larger than tanks, while others scurry like large ants beneath colossal machines of war. Some of the seemingly over-the-top units include a flying air base and a submarine that can carry aircraft.

To aid the massive scale of battle, with skirmishes happening everywhere, the game view can be zoomed in close to the ground, or all the way out to



give a complete overview of the game map. From this view, or in any place during the game, players can give orders and plan strategies. One of the innovative features *Supreme Commander* will boast is that when giving the same destination to two different squads, the units will move at a pace so that both squads arrive at the same location at the same time - perfect for making tactical manoeuvres. Likewise, the shells from units such as artillery can be tracked, and airplanes will follow proper battle formations. Bombers, for example, will fly higher than fighter craft. As an added benefit, the game will feature dual-screen support. This means that players

will be able to have two independent game views on separate monitors. Split-screen is also supported.

The upgrade complaints betray *Supreme Commander's* other appeal. Visually, the game looks very detailed and animated, powered by a physics engine for realistic explosions and damage. *Total Annihilation* did after all revel in splash damage from exploding units and buildings. Nevertheless, for the real deal, players will have a lot more in the area of nukes and other super weapons. Just like the super units, these can be expensive to develop, but they will ensure wholesale and indiscriminate damage to a large area. This time nukes can be detonated over

water, and several units carry their own warheads for swift, close-proximity launches. The sheer amount of units in the game will act as a counter-balance to nukes, but anti-nuke technology is also likely to be in the final game.

In terms of development, *Supreme Commander* is still in its early stages. Gas Powered Games estimates a late 2007 launch at best. On paper and in the demonstrations held so far, it looks set to bring a new age to the strategy genre, and hopefully will introduce more players to the genre. But above all, it takes us back to the most under-appreciated RTS in years. **NAG**



Faster than a speeding bullet, able to run up the side of a tall building and he has better shoes than Superman



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

Developer: Sonic Team Publisher: Sega Distributor: WWE Genre: Platformer Platforms: PS3, 360 Release: 14 November 2006

IT'S BEEN A WHILE, Sonic. Oh, sure you've had *Sonic Adventures 2*, *Sonic Heroes* and *Sonic Riders*, but we'll just forget those were ever developed, and cling to the wonder that was the 16-bit launch of your career, with Green Hill Zone's music wafting in on nostalgia 15 years old.

This new *Sonic the Hedgehog* looks promising, especially since it seems the entire Sonic Team is intent on 'going back to the roots' of what made the blue hedgehog so damn appealing in the first place... speed. This new next-gen incarnation of *Sonic* is an entirely new story, though the developers have hinted that this game may be a recreation of the original, a re-envisioning. Well, whatever it is, it's looking good.

The visual style of the Sonic characters has changed somewhat for this new title. Sonic is taller and more athletic, with a new slick hairdo on his spikes, while Dr Robotnik has lost some weight. Borrowing from *Sonic Adventures*, the game will involve hub-like towns with people to talk to and challenges to accept. The entire artistic direction of the game seems more in line with the original titles: blue skies, green grass and vibrant congruous colours. Sonic Team's director, Shun Nakamura, mentions that Sonic Team will "... pay homage to the past titles, and focus on the future of the franchise," with this new Sonic. "In this new title, we wanted to make Sonic fit into the real world; Sonic racing in a realistic space."

Mixing things up a bit, a new character is introduced - Silver the Hedgehog. In contrast to Sonic's blistering motion-blurred speed, Silver uses telekinesis to approach objectives, and is much more paced. He can use his mind to manipulate scenery, as well as stop bullets in midair. Silver can also hover to hard-to-reach places, though little has been mentioned on how exactly Silver's experiences mix in with Sonic. A confusing plot that involves Silver chasing Sonic, thinking that Sonic is the key to some mysterious power, is about all there is right now.

Initial impressions of the game are good, thanks to the power of next-generation hardware and some inspiration from Sonic Team's side. *Sonic the Hedgehog* is looking more and more like the *Sonic* game everyone has been waiting for, while avoiding the mediocrity Sonic Team has produced lately (not counting the delectable *Sonic Rush* for the DS). This time around, combat also takes a backseat, and Sonic dispatches enemies with a simple auto-lock-on spin attack, or his new slide attack. Combat seems to simply serve as a break to the fast-paced platforming action (instead of the other way around - finally). Shadow the Hedgehog is also set to make an appearance in *Sonic the Hedgehog*, though little is known about his role, other than the fact that he will most likely not be a playable character. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Techland

■ Publisher

Ascaron

■ Distributor

MegaRom [011] 234-2680

■ Genre

Action

■ Release Date

October 2006



CALL OF JUAREZ



POLISH DEVELOPER TECHLAND, AFTER its success with *Chrome*, has decided to leave the future and head for the Wild West. *Call of Juarez* joins the growing legion of games based in this era. However, most are arcade shooters, and as far as the modern action market goes, the theme is still largely unexplored. Years ago, LucasArts released a shooter based in the Wild West, called *Outlaws*, and recently *Gun* set gaming screens alight for a while. However, all have fallen short in one way or another, something that the developer of *Call of Juarez* hopes to fix.

Gamers who expect an open world as toyed with in *Gun* will be disappointed, as this is a far more linear affair. The game is divided between two characters. Billy, whose mother married the brother of Reverend Ray, is accused of murdering the couple, and the good reverend, who also happens to be a bounty hunter, sets out to catch him. He tracks Billy to the Mexican border town of Juarez, incidentally also said to be the place where ancient and cursed Aztec treasure is hidden.

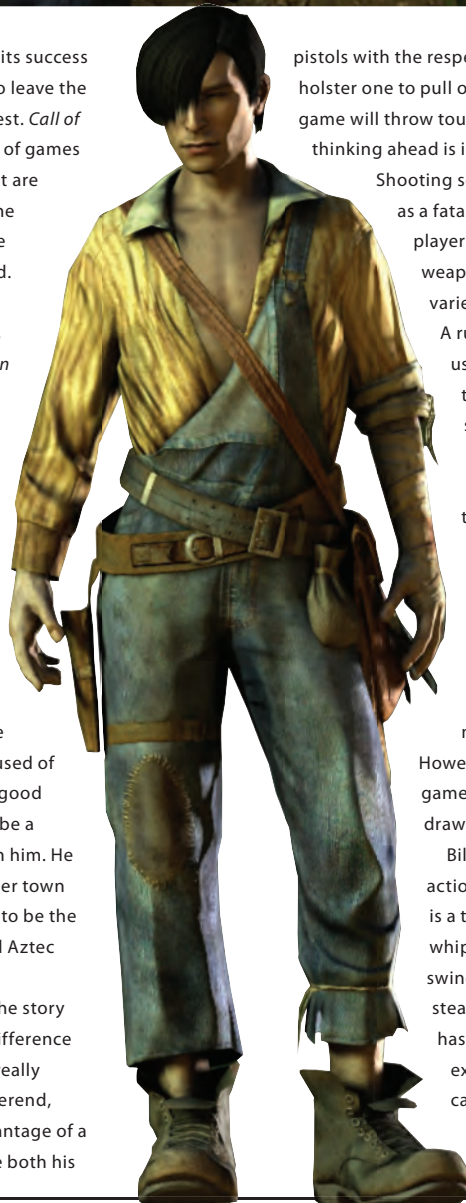
Playing as both means that the story will follow a set pace, but the difference between the two characters is really in how they are played. The reverend, being an action man, has the vantage of a first-person shooter. He can fire both his

pistols with the respective main buttons on a mouse, or holster one to pull off faster shots with both hands. The game will throw tough and smart opponents at players, so thinking ahead is important. Damage is context sensitive.

Shooting someone in the leg won't help as much as a fatal bullet in the chest or head. Likewise, players will also have to pay attention to the weapons. Guns and rifles come in several varieties, but their condition also matters. A rusty gun will soon jam and become useless – not ideal in a gunfight. Luckily, the reverend has an extra trick up his sleeve. Holstering and pulling out both weapons will activate Concentration mode, a tricky mini-game where the target reticles need to be lined up before they reach the middle. Success means that the reverend hits several fighters shooting at him. As an added touch for being a man of the cloth, Ray can also carry a Bible in one hand and preach harsh words that will make more feeble opponents run away.

However, his true skill is in his guns and the game will stage gun duels, where Ray has to draw against an opponent.

Billy plays quite differently. Instead of action, he is more of a survivor, and as such is a third-person experience. With his trusty whip, which can be used to reach objects or swing over gaps, he will be able to employ stealth to help him. This also means he has more choices in what to do. In one example, players will arrive at an Apache camp and decide whether to silently kill all the Apaches or to chase away their horses and steal the last one. Billy



will also be doing a lot of horse riding and hunting.

What remains to be seen, though, is how it will all come together. Graphically, *Call of Juarez* looks impressive, largely thanks to some very good lighting. It's certainly the best a game from the Wild West has ever looked. Unfortunately, the game will demand powerful hardware to be experienced at this level. So far, not too much has been shown to give more detail of how the game will be played. Techland can develop solid game worlds, but as seen in *Chrome*, the story and design side of its games can do with a lot of improving. Taking on the theme of dusty Mexican towns and stone-jaw bounty hunters might be risky, but in the gaming arena, it's still a wide-open space to play in. The studio still needs a breakthrough game to put it on the international development map. If *Call of Juarez* can hold together its controls and keep a good pace, it might bring a new wave of interest in this theme. **NAG**



Jim-Bob begged and pleaded, but Sam wouldn't give his gun back



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Telltale Games

■ Publisher

Telltale Games

■ Distributor

www.telltalegames.com

■ Genre

Adventure

■ Release Date

October 2006

While there is no sign of turning cats inside-out, Sam & Max are back on the job



SAM & MAX

NEXT YEAR WILL MARK the twentieth anniversary of the hyperactive lagomorph and anthropomorphic canine that are collectively known as the Freelance Police. However, most people know Sam & Max from their 1993 game, *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. It has also been just over two years since LucasArts, in a move to reshape itself and break from its legacy, cancelled *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*, much to the dismay of fans. At the same time, a new studio, comprised largely of ex-LucasArts employees, set up shop as Telltale Games. The studio cut its teeth on *CSI* and *Texas Hold 'em*, but soon moved into the adventure genre with *Bone*. Since then, the studio has produced two *Bone* games, all with the close cooperation and enthusiastic support of the comic's creator, Jeff Smith.

Therefore, there is very little worry or animosity amongst fans in the know about the upcoming *Sam & Max: Season 1*. Comic creator Steve Prucell is on board as well, and has even been contributing an online comic to bring new fans up to speed and give the stalwarts something new to read. As the name suggests, *Sam & Max: Season 1* will follow the same episodic format *Bone* has. Unlike the first game, where the duo trotted all over the US, *Season 1* will start in a part of the city Sam and Max live in. Eventually, the entire season will comprise six parts, which will open the city and other locations to the pair. Thankfully, fans won't have to wait for too long. Once the first part is released in October, the second will follow in December, with a part released every month after that until April. At the end, Telltale plans to release a *Season 1* DVD containing all six episodes.

Each episode will have its own story, but there is also an overarching plot thread that ties the

six parts together. In *Episode 1*, Sam & Max have to address a new gang problem in their neighbourhood. Ex-child stars who used to be known as The Soda Poppers are running all over the place, spinning on caffeine and causing problems such as vandalism and blatant identity theft. The Freelance Police decide to get to the cause of the problem with their usual bizarre methodology. The game will feature an equally eclectic cast of supporting characters. While their neighbour, private investigator Flint Paper, won't apparently appear in *Season 1*, there are plenty of others such as Sybil's shop for tattoos and psychotherapy.

The game will be a traditional point-and-click, but combined with the growing expertise of Telltale and the flair and charm of *Sam & Max*, it's definitely going to be something special for fans of the genre. If *Bone* was just too cutesy, then perhaps the Freelance Police will convince gamers to try Telltale's episodic fare. **NAG**



A silver Nokia N95 mobile phone is shown at an angle. The screen displays the game 'Street Racing Runner' with a yellow car racing on a track. The phone is positioned on the right side of the advertisement.

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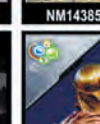


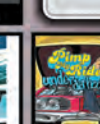


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R30 	 PokerRoom.com POKER ROOM NM15361	 VEGAS! VEGAS! NM9778	 Wild West WILD WEST NM3828

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	 <p>NM23455</p>	 <p>NM22370</p>	 <p>NM25539</p>	 <p>NM20183</p>	 <p>NM22550</p>
	 <p>NM26169</p>	 <p>NM19123</p>	 <p>NM23976</p>	 <p>NM25531</p>	

			
	<p>NM21198</p>	<p>NM22286</p>	<p>NM21647</p>
			
	<p>NM21810</p>	<p>NM25510</p>	<p>NM14996</p>

			
		<p>NM25250</p>	<p>NM24366</p>
			
		<p>NM22143</p>	<p>NM14089</p>
			
		<p>NM23585</p>	<p>NM21422</p>

	 <p>NM25378</p>	 <p>NM16949</p>	 <p>NM21367</p>	 <p>NM25735</p>	 <p>NM23797</p>	 <p>NM17522</p>	 <p>NM25395</p>
 <p>NM24832</p>	 <p>NM24762</p>	 <p>NM14385</p>	 <p>NM15631</p>	 <p>NM24547</p>	 <p>NM24697</p>	 <p>NM25147</p>	 <p>NM14387</p>
 <p>NM21483</p>	 <p>NM22755</p>	 <p>NM25038</p>	 <p>NM24697</p>	 <p>NM25147</p>	 <p>NM14387</p>	 <p>NM14387</p>	

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DESTROY ALL HUMANS! 2

THE PROBLEM WITH THE first game in this series was that expectations were for something other than the game that was presented. Whereas gamers were expecting a freeform experience, *Destroy All Humans!* still stuck to a mission/level structure. While Crypto had fun abilities and dangerous weapons, there was not nearly enough freedom to actually take his talents to town. However, it was still a fun game and a sequel was inevitable. While we have looked at the game last month, this time we spent time with Beta code of *Destroy All Humans! 2*, a sequel Pandemic has definitely spent a lot of time on. Unfortunately, the build code is still unfinished, so several major bugs did cause problems from time to time. Nevertheless, this is hardly a fair reflection of the final product, and Pandemic is an experienced developer, so there's little doubt the glaring issues will be ironed out.

The part that is a lot harder to fix is the game dynamic itself. Here the test code showed off much of what fans can expect. The good news is that Pandemic listened to the complaints; the bad news is that we don't have a final copy yet! Crypto, the Furon clone with Jack Nicholson's drawl, is back on Earth and enjoying the sixties. However, the Russians see the alien operation as a threat to their plans of invading America, so they nuke the mother ship. Luckily for Crypto he was on Earth at the time and his commander survives, albeit as a hologram. After recovering the fallen commander, Crypto sets off on a series of missions to restore his weapons, technology, and communications and eliminate the Russians.

The big difference between the two games is that the series has changed itself into a complete freeform experience. The levels still exist and Crypto will be doing a bit of globe hopping. We managed to

unlock San Francisco and a town in England before faulty code halted our progress, but this is a large chunk to play through already. Each level is a town that can be explored. In the genre's style, missions can be picked from different hot spots on the maps. These are comprised of main missions and 'odd jobs' - side quests that won't affect the game, but award players with Furon cells, the monetary unit. These can be used for your saucer to buy upgrades for your equipment. With the destruction of the mother ship, weapon modules and DNA samples are scattered around. Some are for hundred percenters, but the weapon modules give Crypto more firepower. Statues of the Furon god Aardvogel are also scattered around the game world. Here Crypto gets an order from his god - once he succeeds, the statue turns into a landing spot for his saucer. Some are simple, such as firing at the statue or causing a certain amount of mayhem. Others require some quick thinking, such as rounding up a certain number of people, or silly, such as destroying all the phone boxes because Aardvogel thinks they are for other deities.

The landing zones are particularly useful, as Crypto can't take control of a vehicle. Instead, he can jump into a person and use the body for a limited time. The levels are reasonably big and would be frustrating to traverse on foot all the time. Opening the landing spots has the benefit of allowing one to quickly move to another area in the map. Players pilot the saucer and go anywhere on the map. The saucer's weapons can be used to devastating effect, while playing the game never threw anything against Crypto's craft that it couldn't handle. As with the first game, the entire city can be laid waste as well. However, in order to land, a landing spot has to be used. Using the spots



Developer: Pandemic

Publisher: THQ

Distributor: Ster Kinekor Games

Genre: Freeform

Platforms: PS2

Release: Q4 2006



Destroy all Humans! (and their stuff too)

scattered across town and employing the saucer's cloaking shield is an efficient way to hop around.

Crypto's more evolved powers, apparently due to his genitalia, means that he can still throw people around, as well as other objects – the ability is improved with gene splicing. He can also convince people to follow him – very useful if he needs a new body to hop into without anyone seeing him. While the game is fairly forgiving if the humans see him, eventually the rising alert level will bring out the cops or military. However, this happens fairly often anyway and keeping a low profile brings the level down quickly. Crypto can also jump into a police officer and use a police radio to give the 'all clear'. As with the first game, choosing the right character type is important. A civilian can't access a military base and a hippy won't talk to a square. Usually, one shot kills the

human body, but Crypto's shields are tough and can recharge. Still, the game pushes players to play smartly and use Crypto's abilities to not arouse suspicion – not too much, at least.

The script is silly but fun, and there are plenty of interesting conversations, even in the early code. It's worth recapping the requirements of a mission just to hear a different set of dialogue. Some jokes are a bit corny, but the game's tongue is still in its cheek. Combined with the cities that can be explored, it's a lot of fun going around town doing stuff. The odd jobs are a bit on the thin side, but plenty more could have been added since then. Crypto can also move between cities, so there's always the chance to go back and finish a task. The only requirements for progress are finishing the main missions. Even in such an early form, *Destroy All Humans! 2* looks very solid. It's going to mean another hit for Pandemic and maybe a third game on next-gen. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Midway

■ Publisher

Midway

■ Distributor

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

■ Genre

Combat

■ Release Date

October 2006



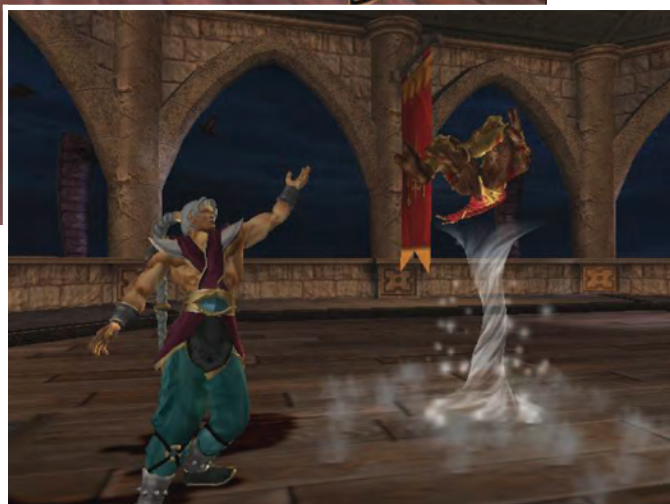
MORTAL KOMBAT: ARMAGEDDON

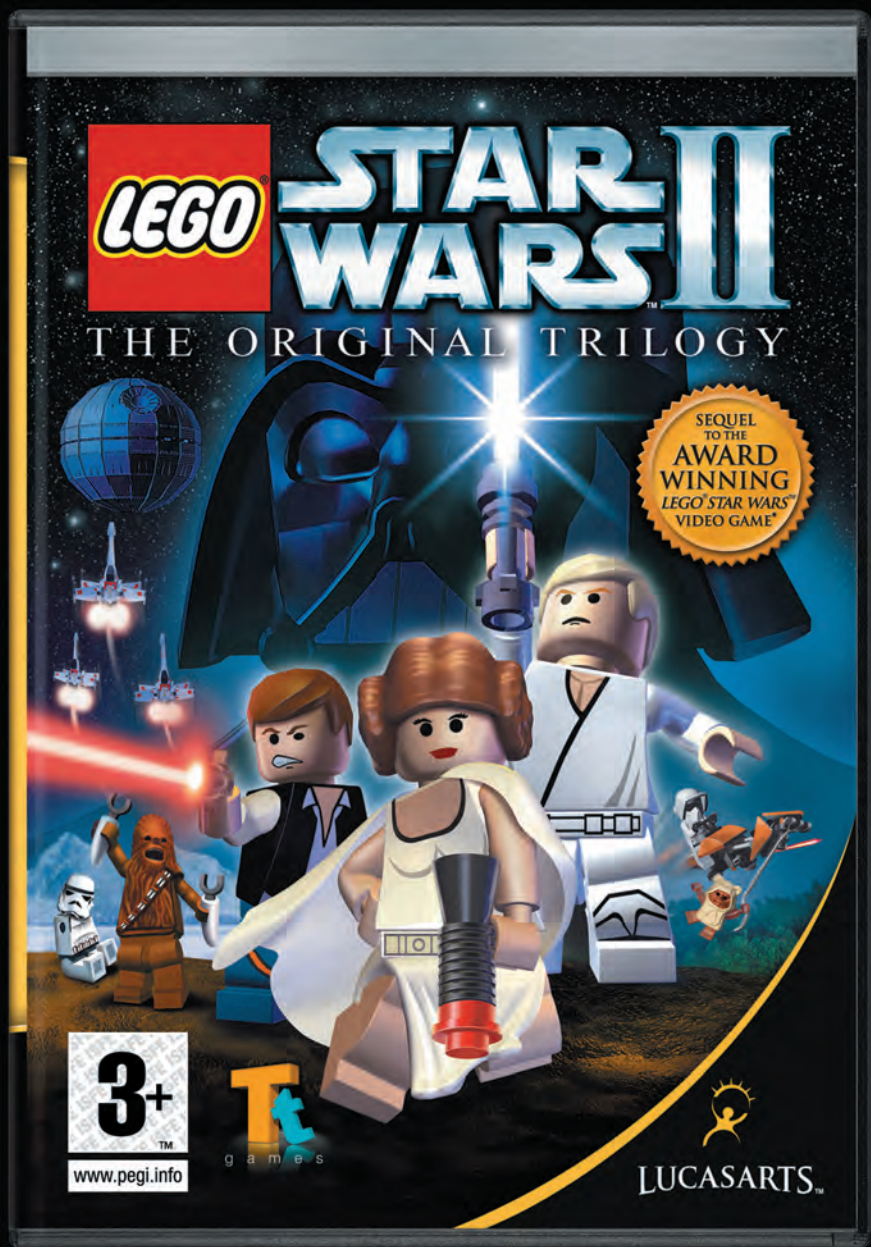
DESPITE THE SERIES BEING on both feet again, *Mortal Kombat* is still far from its former glory. *Deception* was definitely a milestone, with a solid game that made you feel every punch. One of the core aspects of the games has always been the in-your-face quality of the combat. However, perhaps the whole 'fighting for Earth' line has become tired. It's clear that Midway doesn't know what to do either, except to build on the franchise. With the success of *Shaolin Monks*, the publisher is likely to explore other offshoots, but that means the series has to stay alive at its core. As such, *Armageddon* is stated to be the last current-gen game in the series. This means that Midway hopes to spring a surprise in the next-gen version, which is rumoured to be Unreal 3 powered. Perhaps it will just be a visual upgrade.

For now, fans will be happy to hear that *Armageddon* will include every character to have ever appeared in the series. That means all the uninteresting ones as well, but since everyone is getting an upgrade, even boring characters might be fun to try again. It might mean Liu Kang is a zombie, and it remains to be seen which Scorpion and Sub-Zero incarnations will be present. The total amounts to sixty characters, which unfortunately resonate a bit of a signal: Midway doesn't know where it's going with the series. Either way, it's betting all of its chips with such an ensemble, so if anything, *Armageddon* speaks well for whatever is planned in the next game.

The game will extend the characteristic gore that the series is known for, but it will simplify how fatalities can be executed. Now, even if a fatality combo is unknown, a quick player can tap out combo moves that will have cruel effects anyway. Though not as impressive as the scripted kills, these should be fun nonetheless. Players can also create their own fatalities. If the current array of fighters doesn't suffice, there's also a facility to create your own fighter. An RPG story mode will teach players the basics, and add some depth to the game. As usual, there will also be a large number of extras to unlock.

Ultimately, though, the series needs to decide what it wants to be. *Mortal Kombat* has been creative in the past, especially with its level design, visceral combat and extreme gore. Hopefully the next-gen game will hail a return to these roots, but in the meantime, *Armageddon* hopes to keep the flame burning. **NAG**





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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer

Volition

Publisher

THQ

Distributor

Midigital [011] 723-1967

Genre

Freeform

Release Date

October 2006

What is a GTA clone without exploding cars



SAINTS ROW

YOU COULD CALL *SAINTS Row* a *GTA* clone. Everything about it screams of a heritage from the game that has the most influence in the freeform genre. Developments that dabble with so-called emergent gameplay inevitably risk being called a *GTA* clone at some point. However, *Saints Row* is so blatant that the uninitiated might actually think it's a sequel.

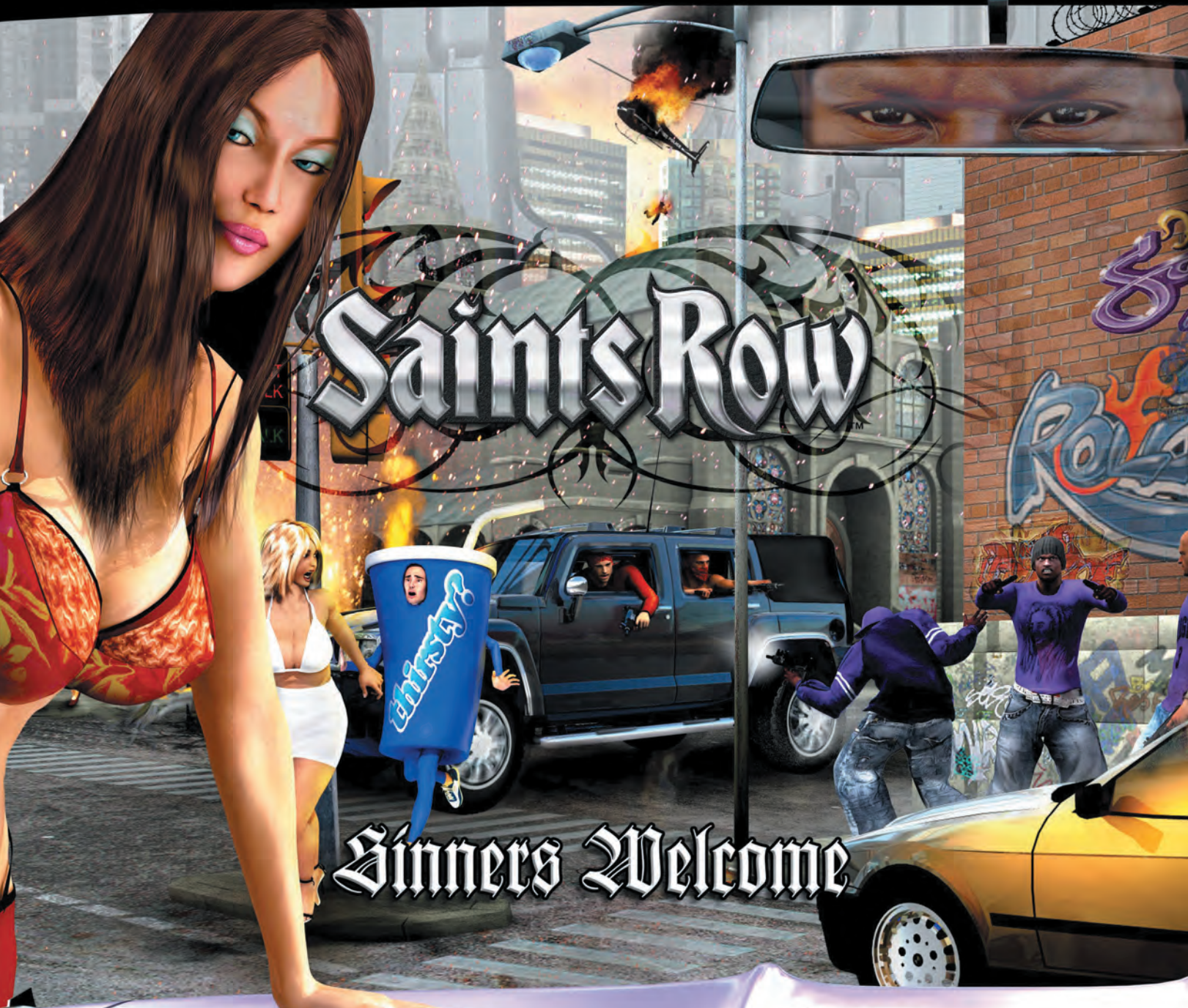
What's wrong with that? One of the frustrating aspects of the genre is that in trying to avoid their game being pigeonholed, developers often overlook some of the great ideas that other games in the genre have come up with. This is most evident in games that try to be *GTA*, but don't want to admit it. *Saints Row*, though, will just pistol-whip you if you laugh at it. That said, a *GTA* experience requires a PlayStation 2, and with *GTA IV* only due in 2007, fans need something in the interim. There are already a few games that can offer that on the 360, but this game is the closest. Yet, *Saints Row* has a few of its own ideas.

All the essential elements are in place. Hollywood car physics abound and the driving in the game is very solid and reactive. Unfortunately, aiming weapons can be tricky, and it appears the game won't have a lock-on system. Nevertheless, this hardly detracts from the experience. At the start, players can design their character. Cosmetic and clothing changes also take place in-game at clothing stores and plastic surgeons. In the opening sequence, the lead character witnesses a shootout amongst three different gangs and is rescued by the leader of the Saints Row gang. He is asked if he wants to join the gang, and naturally, he obliges. Missions in *Saints Row* are tied to the player's reputation. Reputation is enhanced in various ways. One example is *Snatch*, where the player has to hustle prostitutes from another pimp by convincing the sex workers to join his outfit instead, and perhaps beating up the pimp. It's right out of the *GTA* textbook and the character's life of crime is obvious. Missions bring money and advance the game goal: taking over all the areas of the city from other gangs. The in-game cut-scenes are polished and the voice-acting ensemble is impressive. However, at the end of the

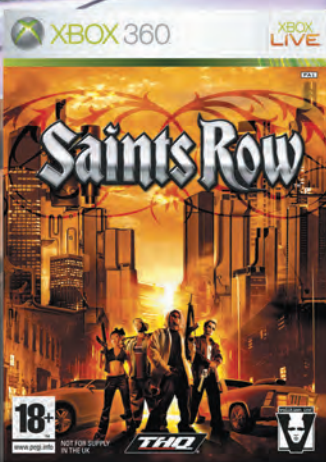
day these things are in the background. When in doubt, grab a car and go for a ride. The impressive graphics and animation add a lot to the game. Civilians will run away in terror if something happens around them, but they also look over their shoulders and occasionally trip or stumble. Likewise, the city is very vibrant and there is constantly something happening nearby.

Call *Saints Row* what you'd like. We'll call it a *GTA* clone, but by that, we only mean good things. At this point, the game's success will depend on whether it keeps the story interesting and the city large and organic. However, it feels solid and we're looking forward to its release. **NAG**





Sinners Welcome



www.saintsrow.com



www.thq.co.uk

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Jump in.



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer

EA

Publisher

EA

Distributor

EA South Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre

Strategy/Action

Release Date

October 2006

Who knew the don could fit into our pocket?



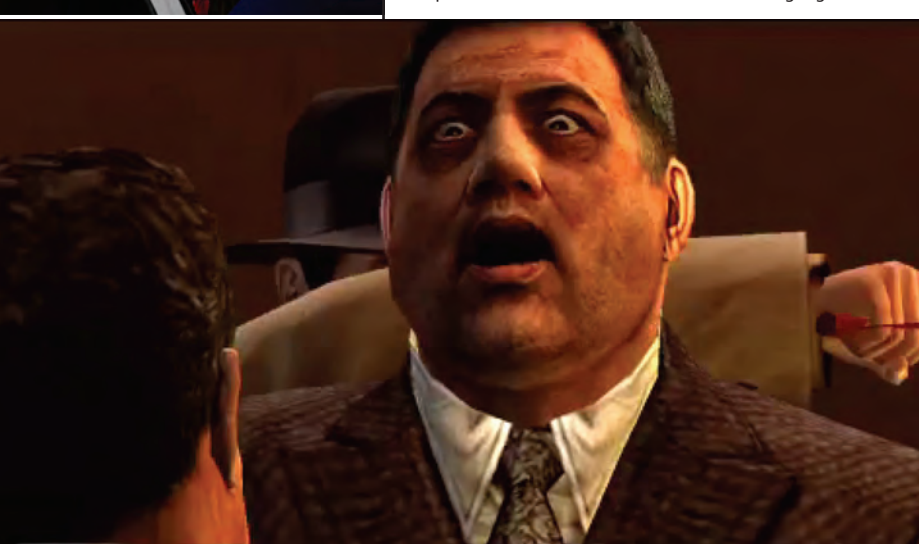
THE GODFATHER: MOB WARS

RECENTLY, THE MOBILE VERSIONS of games have moved away from their console counterparts in terms of design. Unless the experience transfers without much problem from a console to a portable, the latter is usually a different kind of game. This is the case with *Mob Wars*, the PSP incarnation of EA's *The Godfather*. The game follows the same plot as its console brethren. Starting at the bottom, the player's character needs to move up the ranks of the Corleone family, hopefully reaching the level of Godfather. This dominance is largely achieved by taking over the rival families' territories.

This is the aspect *Mob Wars* has given a lot of attention to. Instead of the free-roam experience of the original game, the PSP presents a more modest title, but it is just as compelling. Enemy territories are attacked via a card game. With over 250 cards available, players have to take over territories by directing forces to areas and using cards to sway things to their advantage. Reputation is important and starting mob wars can be hard on the family business, so fights should be picked cunningly. How this will affect the way console versions lead players along the story line remains to be seen, but it allows for quick bursts of game sessions - ideal for the PSP. Third-person sections do exist. When taking a neighbourhood or in some other scenarios, the game turns into the familiar third-person action mode. The combat system is apparently completely intact, and virtual mobsters can use their fists and gun skills to persuade business owners and take on rival gangs. The

card system is more to manage the reputation system that underpinned the console version. With EA considering its development future on the PSP, *Mob Wars* might be one of the last EA-developed games on the platform. It has also been an expensive game for the publisher. While *The Godfather* didn't bomb, it hardly set the scene alight. A PSP version has been in the works for a while, hopefully boosting more interest in the franchise, while a 360 version is about to be released.

Mob Wars is a more focused battle for New York with more strategic appeal than the action-heavy console game. Hopefully this will bring another side to the *Godfather* license. **NAG**





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"Our focus is to have the best gameplay, the best vehicles and the best soldier experience," Marcus adds. "That's what we're aiming for." And that's why no one does war like DICE.



"We wanted people to feel like they're in the future without alienating them from the game," says Producer Jamil, explaining the fundamental decision to keep recognisable vehicles and ballistic weapons.

FUTURE WAR TOYS

This doesn't mean you don't get your hands on ultramodern warfare – expect smart mines that home in on vehicles, hovering gun drones to cover your back, and a tried-and-tested assortment of weapons updated for next century fighting. And then there are the new combat vehicles... Let's just say no one is likely to forget their first encounter with an eight-metre high Battle Walker.

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There are now 40 highly different unlocks to be tailored into some 1500 combinations to suit your killing style. "We constantly find so many different ways to use the toys we've created that we haven't noted them all yet," says Producer Anders, sporting the smile of a man who clearly loves his work.

1500 WAYS TO DIE

Because the system is persistent, awards and unlocks are tied into your rank and, crucially, they're now immediate, so once you pick an item you're then able to use it the very next respawn. Speaking of rank, the new Supreme Commander position will now highlight one player as the best in the world. Visit www.battlefield.ea.com to find out if you have a shot at the title.



www.eaplay.co.za

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Deep Red Games

■ Publisher

Codemasters

■ Distributor

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

■ Genre

Management

■ Release Date

Q1 2007



A hospital must be a happy place
if it looks like everyone's dancing

HOSPITAL TYCOON

YOUR FIRST REACTION TO these screenshots might betray your age, or at least how long you've been playing games.

Add a female voice with a British accent, announcing a cleanup in the corridor, and it looks like *Theme Hospital*. The Bullfrog classic from 1997 has not seen much of a legacy since – hospitals are probably a bit mundane for a game setting. However, *Theme Hospital* did it right by mixing healthy amounts of slapstick into a basic, but involved, management game. Hospital space had to be allocated wisely, and the right professionals for the job – doctors, nurses, cleaners, etc. – had to be hired. Patients couldn't be kept waiting for too long, but over-staffing also cost you. On top of that, you had to prepare

for that occasional outbreak and the Kit Kat machine being on the fritz again.

This, though, is *Hospital Tycoon*, a new management game from Deep Red Games, recently acclaimed for *Tycoon City: New York*. The similarity between the two games, thus far, is so striking that one might think some former Bullfrog developers are involved. Perhaps it's the shared British citizenship or the fact that Deep Red was established the year after *Theme Hospital* was released.

However, idle speculation aside, there is nothing wrong with a game that follows in the footsteps of a Bullfrog classic. That said, the game will offer much more in terms of challenge and features. Deep Red is known for its management games, and the game's description explains the management of whole departments and a larger variety of treatment facilities. Nevertheless, a lot of humour is applied to add a dash of colour to the drabness of a hospital. The patients will arrive with strange diseases that will likely require some exotic contraption to cure. Some diseases can spread, so fast and effective cures are important.

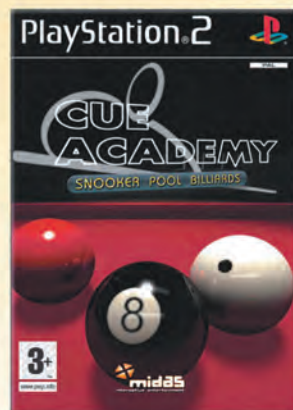
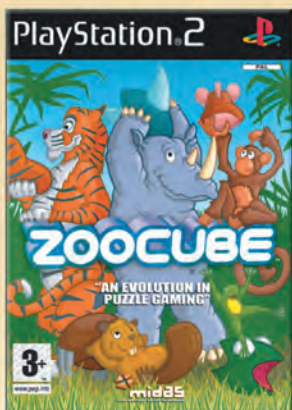
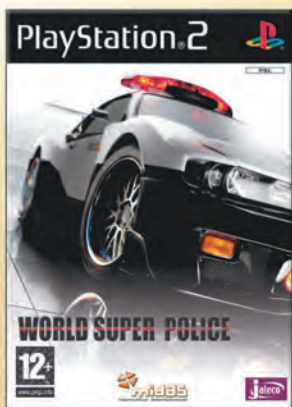
A basic description of the game is very similar to *Theme Hospital*, so the depth is likely to lie in the variety of problems and research, as well as managing the staff and patient flow. There will be more ways to entertain visitors, such as prize machines, and while this is pure speculation, perhaps players will have to consider bored or worried family members waiting for news on a patient.

Despite all the calls for original games, there are hundreds of titles in gaming's past that were great, but never emerged in any form again. This could very possibly be a spiritual successor to *Theme Hospital* and that's reason enough to be interested in it. The interesting approaches to management Deep Red has shown in *City Tycoon* and *Monopoly Tycoon* mean that there will be a few surprises in the mix as well. Now if only someone would start working on another *Syndicate* game. **NAG**

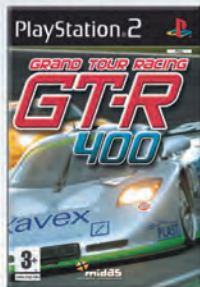


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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer

Ubisoft Montreal

Publisher

Ubisoft

Distributor

TBA

Genre

Stealth/Action

Release Date

2007

If done right, *Assassin's Creed* will make *Prince of Persia* achievements look crippled



ASSASSIN'S CREED

THE YEAR IS 1191, and the Third Crusade is doing its destructive thing in the Holy Land. In this time of Dark Age strife and warfare exists a secret group of assassins, tasked with the responsibility to make sure conflicts don't get out of hand and that things are, as far as possible, suppressed on both sides of the war. That means that some key people will need to be killed for the sake of peace, and the assassins are the ones to do the job.

This is the underlying theme of *Assassin's Creed*, an upcoming action/stealth title from Ubisoft Montreal. The studio is already renowned for its work on *Splinter Cell* and *Prince of Persia*, as well

as *Rainbow Six*, so the talent and experience behind

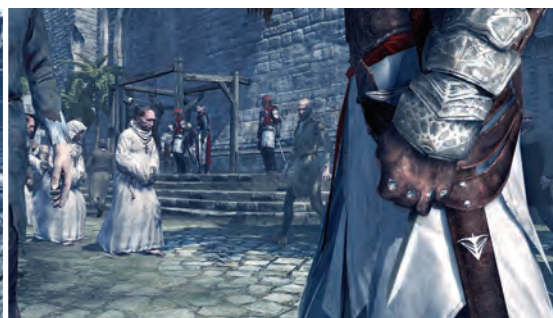
the project are obvious. It shows, because as ambitious as the game might sound, it appears to be up to the challenge. Nevertheless, that's perhaps a bit easier with the power of next-generation hardware.

In *Assassin's Creed*, players take on the role of Altaïr, a dangerous man with a lot of ability to take you out quietly using his deadly skills. If the idea sounds a bit

like *Hitman*, you wouldn't be far off. *Assassin's Creed* will give players a huge amount of freedom, letting them decide how to carry out a mission. However, the theme also reminds of *Splinter Cell*, and likewise, Altaïr will be very nimble. According to Ubisoft, the player can grab onto anything that extends out two inches or more, which essentially means that nearly any building, given enough patience, can be scaled. On the rooftops or on the ground, Altaïr is very fluid on his feet. In motions that remind of the urban sport of Parkour, he leaps from rooftop to rooftop, kicking against walls and grabbing ledges as he flies through the air. This betrays the *Prince of Persia* influence on the game. Essentially, *Assassin's Creed* is the best of many games moulded into one.

All of this happens with very fluid, key-framed animation, though Ubisoft's motion-capture studio is probably also being utilised. Where the game makes a clear breakthrough, though, is how the crowds work. Befitting an assassin, Altaïr doesn't just shove people out of the way or clip through them. Instead, players can navigate a crowd by slipping through them, putting a hand on the shoulders of people Altaïr moves past. He can also shove his way through, but the crowd is very reactive, and in *Assassin's Creed* you have to pick your fights. Even the best of assassins don't stand a chance against an angry mob.

Various things make *Assassin's Creed* sound and look interesting, and it is looking quite spectacular. But you will have to wait until next year to get the chance to play it. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	M08

■ Developer

Starbreeze Studios

■ Publisher

2K Games

■ Distributor

Megarom [011] 234-2680

■ Genre

Action

■ Release Date

Q4 2006



THE DARKNESS

IN THE ORIGINAL TRAILER released for *The Darkness*, a creature is followed as it hits out lights in a building. It culminates with a shadowy figure standing at the top, two monsters snaking out of his shoulders. So far, there is little known about the game, except that it is being developed by Starbreeze "Riddick" Studios. The Swedish team has since signed a deal with a new developer and started work on its next-gen product. This was later revealed to be *The Darkness*. It's the story of a young mobster who is granted dark and very deadly powers. In the game, his uncle tries to kill him, which unleashes these dark powers inside him as he thirsts for revenge.

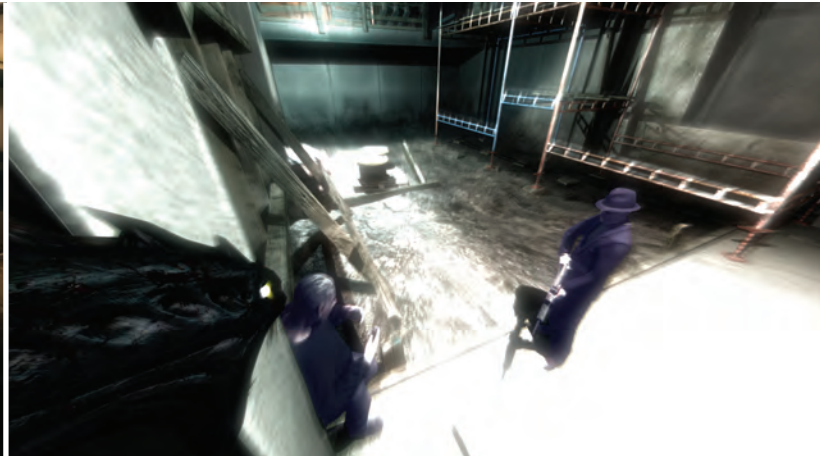
The problem with a straightforward game about the comic is that the hero, Jackie Estacado, is extremely powerful and his powers very diverse. While the game will deliver some serious supernatural foes, the dynamic lies in how his powers are employed. In order for them to work, there needs to be darkness – hence the creature taking out the light bulbs. This is in fact a Darkling, one of many creatures under Jackie's command and capable of many devious acts. One type takes out lights while another hurls itself at enemies. There are many more with unspecified powers, but screenshots suggest some grotesque and bizarre actions. This is to be expected – *The Darkness* is a mature comic and the game will be quite



intense. Darklings and other powers can also be found by consuming especially evil characters.

Jackie's powers extend beyond Darklings. The Darkness can also manifest as tentacles, black holes and an extremely powerful demon arm. Jackie will be able to project himself into a room and he also has solid gun fighting skills. As with *Riddick*, *The Darkness* will let players explore the world and try to complete all the various sub-missions in areas. A subway system will even facilitate quick travel between sections, while the conversation trees and level designs will give players options for how to approach a mission or situation.

The Darkness looks set to continue the impressive work we experienced in *Chronicles of Riddick*, while it looks stunning on next-gen hardware. It appears that it's once again up to Starbreeze to show just how one develops a licensed game. **NAG**



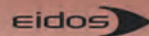
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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer

Sunflowers/SEK

Publisher

Deep Silver

Distributor

Megarom [011] 234-2680

Genre

Strategy

Release Date

October 2006

Don't scratch it, I just had this dinosaur refitted

PARAWORLD

THERE'S SOMETHING FASCINATING ABOUT the giant lizards that used to roam the planet millions of years ago. The biggest attraction of these creatures is probably their mythical stature. As much as dinosaurs were real, they are still shrouded in mystery. The average person will definitely not be able to venture beyond names like Brontosaurus, T-Rex and more recently Velociraptor. We're not dinosaur experts either, despite spending countless childhood hours looking at books about them. Luckily, no one needs to know their Ornithischia from their Saurischia to play

Paraworld, a new strategy title from Sunflowers.

The game made a splash when it was announced, largely thanks to some incredible in-game shots. The first peek at HUD screens have finally appeared, and the graphical flair of the game is certainly a bit more muted. But it still looks impressive, and *Paraworld* is likely to sit well next to the latest strategy bling. Historical accuracy isn't a big feature, so don't expect cave dwellers running around commanding dinosaurs (though even that would be inaccurate).

Instead, there are three tribes to choose from. The Dust Riders are fast, mobile people reminiscent of the American Indians, while The Dragon Clan has an Asian flavour and uses basic gunpowder technology to drive its empire. And if the Norsemen don't give it away, these Vikings like to mince few words. The way to victory in *Paraworld* is to capture dinosaurs and convert them into a variety of unit types. Normal tribes people take up the role of standard units, such as peasants and soldiers, but a Mammoth is apparently a great resource gatherer, while a Brontosaurus can be equipped as a gatherer, troop carrier or even siege weapon. The game has normal resources, but in order to upgrade and research technologies, you'll need Skulls. These are gathered while a unit is in combat, so progress means you have to fight.

It won't be easy. *Paraworld* is set in a hostile environment and boasts four different climate zones. This changes the kind of species that can be found on the map. Animals such as the dinosaurs and other ancient heavy-hitters have to be captured and tamed, while wild ones can serve as food. The armies will be smaller in scale and players will be encouraged to experiment with the different unit types. With a proven understanding of RTS with the *Anno* games, it looks like this German developer is planning to make its big push. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer

Avalanche Studios

Publisher

Edios Interactive

Distributor

Megarom 1011234-2680

Genre

Action

Release Date

18A



JUST CAUSE

JUST CAUSE SEEMS TO draw inspiration from just about anywhere it can be found in gaming - the rough jungles of *Far Cry*, the car-hopping action of *Pursuit Force* alongside the utterly *Grand Theft Auto* approach to emergent gameplay. After some hands-on time with the recently released demo on Xbox Live we noticed that a bowl with such ingredients might just taste delicious.

Set on some fictional South American tropical island called San Esperito, you play black-leather clad, sexy all-round hardcore Rico Rodriguez, with the goal of overthrowing the island's dictator. The demo itself is limited to a portion of the island, but bodes well for the rest of the rather massive environment. There is a certain grandeur to the terrain itself, a much more perceptible distance and scope - not unlike the more spectacular parts of *Far Cry*. Appreciating the terrain is remarkably easy, thanks to Rico who will happily leap off a cliff. From there, a button tap gets you your own personal paraglider, but not just for sightseeing. The more practical use of the chute is that you can drop down on cars. From there, you can either stay on the hood or commandeer the vehicle. If another car is nearby, you can jump to it with another button press. When the action heats up, it's remarkable to watch how quickly *Just Cause* can become a series of stunts and explosions.

The amount and variety of vehicles on, above and around the island create a wonderful playground of experiences, much as the genre tends to lend itself to. Avalanche seems to have taken great care to make each vehicle feel just right - not too light or too heavy. In a game where most of what you do is travel in vehicles, this can be a remarkable boon. *Just Cause* feels more like a slick *James Bond* game (with a touch of excessiveness), than any of the actual *James Bond* games before it. The ability to leap from the cockpit of a helicopter, onto the front, and then back flip over the propeller blades to catch the tail fin by fingertips, is one that shouldn't go unnoticed.

While the island itself is a beauty overall, it's the little details that seem unpolished. Character models for enemies are very low-detail, especially compared to Rico himself. The vehicles are detailed and break apart convincingly enough. Based on the wonderful transition from the pet engine we saw at E3 last year, to an actual game with substance, *Just Cause* appears to be in good hands and on the right track, ready to expand the genre with a solid addition. **NAG**

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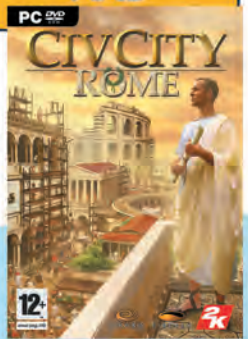
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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Nintendo

■ Publisher

Nintendo

■ Distributor

Nintendo SA [011] 256-7760

■ Genre

Adventure

■ Release Date

Early 2007



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS



WHILE WITH *Twilight Princess* Nintendo decided to forgo the utterly charismatic *Wind Waker* art direction, with *Phantom Hourglass* it has decided to embrace it. For Link's new adventure on the Nintendo DS, the stylus is the main control method. Running around the landscape, you simply tap and hold where you want Link to go. Tapping an enemy will attack, while drawing a circle around Link will make him do his spin-slash. Double tapping an enemy will make Link throw whatever he has in his hands at them. Other uses for the stylus include drawing a path for your boat. During such sections, the boat will follow the path, being randomly attacked by enemies you must tap on to dispatch of. Certain doors may even require you to draw symbols to open them. Even the boomerang now follows a course you plot with the stylus, and you can make handwritten notes on dungeon maps. The entire feel of *Phantom Hourglass* reminds of *Link's Awakening* on Game Boy - a solid adventure with some new twists. Concern could be expressed over the new control scheme for Link, as many would prefer the traditional D-pad solution, though initial impressions favour the new stylus control. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Konami

■ Publisher

Konami

■ Distributor

TBA

■ Genre

Action

■ Release Date

TBA

CASTLEVANIA: PORTRAIT OF RUIN

THE NINTENDO DS SEEMS to have given the *Castlevania* series a new lease on life alongside the current PlayStation 2 offerings after the successful *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow*. *Portrait of Ruin* is themed around two controllable characters: vampire hunter Jonathan Morris and a sorceress named Charlotte Aulin. Both were childhood friends, but descended from clans devoted to the protection of humankind against evil. Plot wise, it's the usual: the two heroes must stop vampire artist Brauner from summoning Dracula's castle. The game is set in 1944 during World War II, though how this influences the plot itself has yet to be seen. Players can switch freely between Jonathan and Charlotte, as well as combine their powers for combination attacks. The environments range from Egyptian deserts to old towns, thanks to paintings that Brauner has placed throughout the castle. Progression leads to new skills, equipment and items, while Charlotte's magic seems to involve the return of stylus input - though after how shoddily the stylus was used in *Dawn of Sorrow*, a return might not be welcome. In an odd twist for a *Castlevania*, Jonathan cannot use the whip right from the start.

There are talks of a multiplayer mode that supports the online Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection that may incorporate a VS or cooperative mode, though nothing concrete has been announced yet. **NAG**



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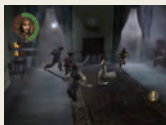
DEFCON [PC]

NAG [100]	90
Metacritic [100]	NA
Gamerankings [100]	NA



PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN [PS2]

NAG [100]	50
Metacritic [100]	51
Gamerankings [100]	53



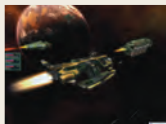
RESERVOIR DOGS [PS2]

NAG [100]	65
Metacritic [100]	69
Gamerankings [100]	67



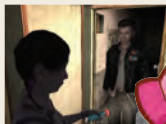
DARKSTAR ONE [PC]

NAG [100]	71
Metacritic [100]	71
Gamerankings [100]	70



FORBIDDEN SIREN 2 [PS2]

NAG [100]	70
Metacritic [100]	75
Gamerankings [100]	NA



SUPER PRINCESS PEACH [DS]

NAG [100]	71
Metacritic [100]	75
Gamerankings [100]	76



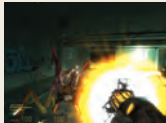
SHADOWGROUNDS [PC]

NAG [100]	80
Metacritic [100]	74
Gamerankings [100]	74



HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1 [PC]

NAG [100]	92
Metacritic [100]	88
Gamerankings [100]	87

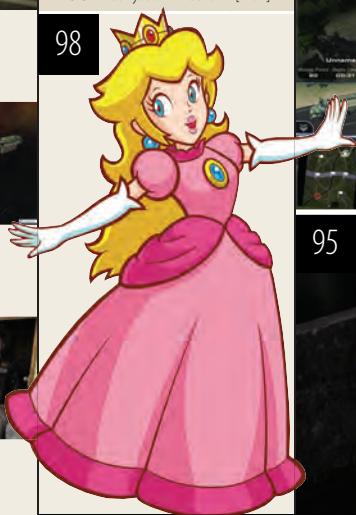


The ratings in this section, apart from the NAG ratings, are not the opinion of NAG Magazine. Duh. All scores were correct at time of printing.

INDEX

82	DEFCON	[PC]
86	War on Terror	[PC]
88	Reservoir Dogs	[PS2]
90	DarkStar One	[PC]
92	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	[PC]
94	Miami Vice	[PSP]
95	Forbidden Siren 2	[PS2]
96	Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow	[PS2]
97	Shadowgrounds	[PC]
98	Super Princess Peach	[DS]
98	Big Brain Academy	[DS]
99	Tokobot	[PSP]
100	Tropical Madness	[MOB]
100	Tour de France 06	[MOB]
100	Zoo Tycoon 2 Mobile	[MOB]

98



82



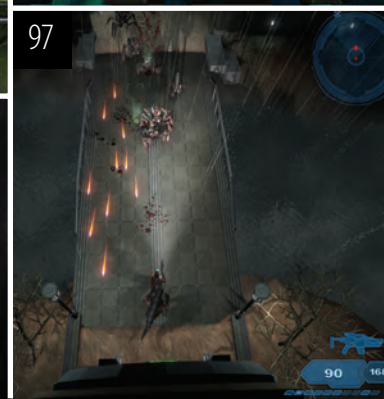
86



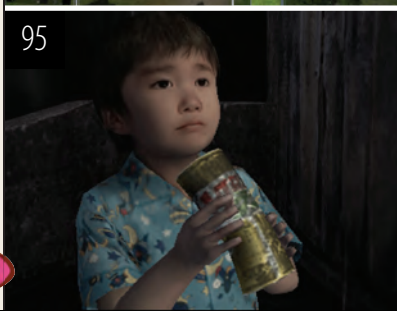
99



97



95



WHAT WE'RE PLAYING...



DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT & MAGIC (DEMO) (PC)
Running, jumping, climbing a rope - nothing is too difficult for an action-warrior! The *Dark Messiah* demo has us hacking at Orcs or casting fireball at the darkness, while our rigs keel over from exhaustion. The souped-up Source engine does a number on lesser machines, but it's totally worth it. Oddly enough, the last time we had this much fun kicking things was with *Duke Nukem 3D*.



MAJESTY: THE FANTASY KINGDOM SIM (PC)
Back in 2000, this little gem was released with no fanfare. It's a unique real-time strategy game that takes more inspiration from *Theme Park* than it does from *Command and Conquer*. You run a medieval fantasy village while your warriors, mages and such wander about doing their own thing. You can influence their actions by placing bounties on things, but generally, they can manage themselves. Old, but still good.



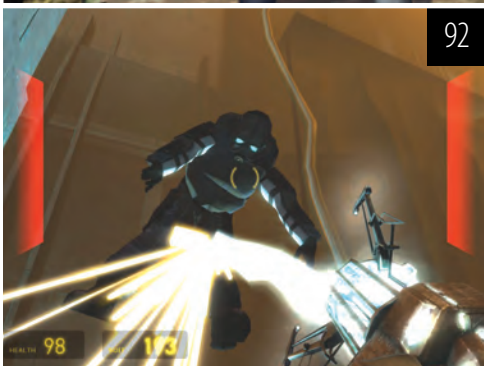
90



96



88



92

AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE

This prestigious award gets bestowed upon games that really catch NAG's collective eye. The Editor's Choice award is for games that have some indefinable trait that just make them stand head and shoulders above the rest, peering about nervously. Usually, games that are fun, visually stunning and which leave a lasting impression are honoured with the coveted Editor's Choice. It's almost similar to knighthood, but not as humiliating!



CLASSIC AWARD

Any game that scores above 85% gets the much-envied Classic Award in honour of its achievement. Above 85% represents a game that has managed to set itself apart from the crowd of mediocrity – a game worthy of some attention. Games awarded the Classic Award are games you can trust.



SCORING

NAG is different, NAG is special. We score games on the 50% principle, meaning that we regard 50% as 'average'. It's neither here, nor there. 50% is the perfect middle ground. A game that scores 50% is a game that does nothing wrong, but nothing right either. If a game won't install properly, naturally it scores less than 50%. If a game brings something new to the table, or does what it does well, it'll go up from the 50% average. 60% is above average, a game that might appeal to some. 70% is a game that's pushing its own limits slightly, one that's perhaps putting a new spin on common ideas. 80% represents a game with a difference, one of quality and as few rough edges as possible. 90% is outstanding, a game that has separated itself from the horde to do its own thing, and does it well. No game will ever achieve 100%, because if a game ever did, we'd be out of jobs. Nobody would play anything else anyway.



CHROME HOUNDS (360)

It's been a while since a game has come along that lets you be a warrior in a mech. While *Chrome Hounds* is by no means *Mechwarrior*, it takes up the mantle and goes a good distance with it, especially with its online persistent war mode, where three rival factions battle for control of territory. Building custom mechs is a joy, while visually the game gradients smoothly from nice, to 'eye candy-luscious'.



TEXAS HOLD 'EM (XBOX LIVE ARCADE)

"One of the best computerised poker games, ever!", says the office, except when drunk Finns burp into their headsets, for everyone to hear. While the NAG office is in poker mode, no doubt *Texas Hold 'em* will keep their attention - much more so than *Uno* ever did. You can't gamble for real money unfortunately, though perhaps this is a blessing in disguise.



SAINTS ROW (DEMO) (360)

Gamers often talk about clones, games that are a direct copy of another game with names and places changed. *Saints Row* is not just a clone of *Grand Theft Auto* - it is **the** clone. It perfectly mimics the best parts of *Grand Theft Auto*, all wrapped up in some lush visuals, with rather detailed innocent bystanders who run, jump, and curl into foetal positions when you drive by.

DEFCON

THERE IS A MOURNFUL grace to the stark dashed arches that follow the flight path of an intercontinental ballistic missile in *Defcon*. Such an ICBM blossoms into a large white circle of death upon impact. In the short-term, New York has seven million people less. In the long-term, one strike easily sparks a global thermonuclear war where one simply hopes to lose the least.

The third game from Introversion Software as well as the first multiplayer title from 'the last of the bedroom programmers', *Defcon* manages to be a subtle game whose charms lie beyond the crisp, clean glowing vector lines of the world map. Inspired by the visuals of the 1983 science-fiction film *Wargames*, the goal of *Defcon* is to exterminate your enemy's civilian population while removing their means for retaliation or attack. Aiding you in this task are battleships, bombers, submarines, and carriers as well as the all-important nuclear missile.

Much of the charm to be found in *Defcon* stems from the rather unique methodology applied to how a round of global thermonuclear war plays out. Players select their region (such as South America or Europe, or it can be assigned randomly), and then have to place their limited set of units and buildings. Every player gets the same, making *Defcon* more of a tactical, patient experience, since you cannot replenish your stocks of nukes, planes or airfields. Once every player (up to six participants in any combination of AI players and/or real people) has placed their stock, the game begins at Defcon 5. The Defcon system keeps the pace, and manages the action. After a certain amount of time, the game chimes Defcon 4 and now forces can move around, but not attack. At Defcon 3, you can attack enemy units as well as launch bombers and fighters from carriers and/or airfields. Defcon 2 exists 'for continued hostility', while Defcon 1 is the party animal. At Defcon 1, ICBM launches may occur.

The unit interactions create the strategic element of *Defcon*. Air defence, for example, shoots down incoming planes and missiles.

The air defence can be turned into a missile silo for launching nukes, but there is a catch: once you launch an ICBM, the location of your silo is revealed. Your silo also cannot turn back into air defence too quickly, leaving it vulnerable. In an anxious game, often it only takes that first launch to cause all-out warfare, and pretty soon, the entire planet develops a bad case of nuclear mushroom acne. On the oceans, submarines are perfect for sneaking up to a coastline for launching some in-your-face attacks, while carriers and battleships do their respective jobs of launching fighters/bombers, searching for submarines, or going on the offensive against incoming enemy units. While there may not be many units in the game to control, each unit has a complex set of interactions depending on how they are used, or grouped with others. For example, battleships have no defence against submarines, while bombers can both launch missiles and attack naval units. Into the mix comes the radar that will detect and show enemies within its radius - rather crucial to giving your air defence enough warning to shoot down incoming death.

During a multiplayer game (or a romp against several AI opponents), everything is about timing and placement. Waiting for that perfect moment to strike, while making sure your own borders don't go undefended, is a captivating balancing act. The true tension, however, comes from a round consisting entirely of human opponents. In such a case, *Defcon*'s alliance system kicks in.

It should be noted that even with alliances there is still only one winner (or loser), which can cause havoc with friendships. To join an existing alliance, all the members of the alliance must vote - a rather unique implementation that works remarkably well. By no means is an alliance set in stone and the ability to quickly backstab your allies to try to go for gold results in complex, yet entertaining patterns of nuclear retaliation.

Since the primary focus of *Defcon* is that of online/LAN multiplayer, it is a pleasure to see such a capable networking system.



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

£10 (www.everybody-dies.com)
\$14.95 (www.steampowered.com)

Developer

Introversion Software

Publisher

Introversion Software/Steam

Supplier

Steam

Genre

Strategy

Age Restriction

NA

Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 1.8GHz
Video: 64MB Graphics Card
RAM: 512MB RAM
HDD: 50MB HDD
CD/DVD: NA
Internet: Yes



BOTTOM LINE

By no means a simulator for thermonuclear war, Defcon is instead the joyride one could have (with friends) provided you could stockpile enough kilotons of plutonium.

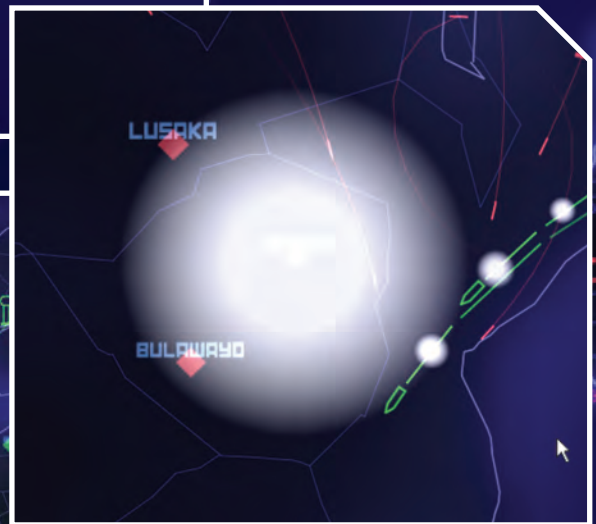
90/100

Risk

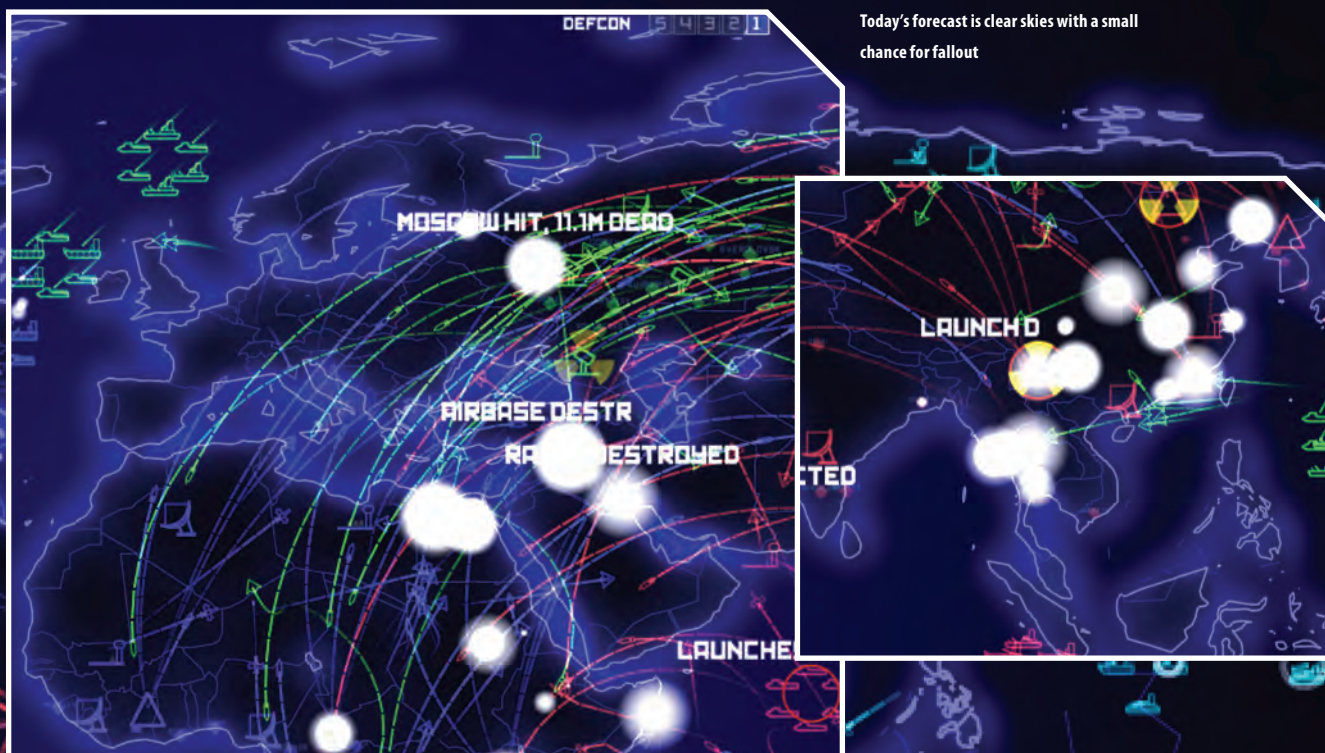


The End of the World





[CPU]Player 2	73
[CPU]Player 3	19
[CPU]Player 5	17
[CPU]Player 1	17
Miktar	-13
[CPU]Player 4	-31



Today's forecast is clear skies with a small chance for fallout

Not only is lag minimal, but if a player disconnects for whatever reason, that player can easily rejoin the game in progress with nothing lost except time. In a game where the battles can range (on average) from 40 minutes up to six hours, naturally this feature is wholly appreciated. *Defcon* actually contains many thoughtful little touches that not just enhance the experience, but show a sincere interest from Introversion Software in its own product. The interface can be adjusted and customised to a degree, while a variety of game types help spice up that vanilla. The most notable feature, however, is that of the Boss Key. Double-tap the Escape key, and *Defcon* minimises to an inconspicuous little system-tray icon that will flash to indicate if you're about to get a rainstorm of nukes.

The game types mentioned include Big World mode, which scales the world up 200% and adjusts the units slightly for much longer (and perhaps more traditional) games. Office Mode is the most applicable these days. The mode is suited for long (6-hour) games during office hours - fingers hovering over Escape. There is a plethora of settings that the host can fiddle with, including population numbers and number of cities.

As *Defcon* is very time-centric in its approach, the game can be played at (or set to) a variety of speeds, ranging from real-time to twenty times the speed. For multiplayer, the server can be set to

handle the speed selection many ways, including 'lowest requested', which sets the game speed to whatever speed is the lowest requested amongst all the players. Online, however, such a function could easily be abused, and instead the server can set the game to a specific speed. Alternatively, a 'mutual setting' method will set the game speed to whatever all the players have chosen.

One could criticise the lack of content in *Defcon* despite the tutorial, though at the rational price of the game, one would be hard-pressed to make such criticism stick. In context of what *Defcon* is, and says it is, the execution of the game is mostly flawless, with only the one glaring omission of the ability to record and play back a particularly exhilarating session. Another feature which would have added to longevity (but is not as important), would be the ability to create and/or define your own fictional world map, something that may hopefully be added in the future along with replay functionality.

The reactive music in *Defcon* is worth an honourable mention, and becomes almost half of the experience: beautifully arranged background melodies and atmosphere softly coerce you into a false sense of security. A strike on one of your cities slowly twists the melody into something off-key and heartbreaking - an experience one doesn't easily forget.

There is a balance of grace to fun in *Defcon*, something that usually remains slightly absent in indie-developed games. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R440

Developer

Digital Reality

Publisher

Deep Silver / Monte Cristo

Supplier

MegaRom (011) 234-2680

Genre

RTS

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 2GHz

Video: 64MB Graphics Card

RAM: 512MB RAM

HDD: 4.0GB HDD

CD/DVD: DVD-ROM

Internet: Supported

Players: 1-8

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WAR ON TERROR

IN THE REALM of strategy games, only one theme rivals World War II for popularity amongst developers: the current situation with Middle Eastern tensions and the war on terror. This very originally titled game explores this theme, which will likely become very tired within the next couple of years. It is a real pity that developers seem compelled to jump on bandwagons in their droves, as games like this one, which is technically fairly sound, end up failing entirely to excite.

War on Terror opens with cut-scenes depicting a story that is somewhere between intriguing and clichéd. As stories in strategy games go, this one is, admittedly, not too bad. Although it feels somewhat contrived and, as mentioned above, clichéd at times, it has nevertheless enjoyed some thought in its design. Unfortunately, however, the characters are rather boring.

As suggested above, this title has little wrong with it from a technical point of view, so let us cover this aspect first. The graphics are reasonably good, and appear to use a derivative of a modified *Act of War* engine. Although the textures and models are well rendered, some of the animations have been skimmed on. For example, one will often find a civilian gliding instead of walking.

The soundtrack is also rather good. The music has atmosphere and substance to it. Sound effects are what can be expected – engines, gunshots and explosions, along with the units' acknowledgements. None of this is extraordinary in any way, but neither is it poorly executed.

The game mechanic is rather reminiscent of that found in *Ground Control II*. Players start with control of a reinforcement delivery point, and capture more as the game progresses (assuming everything is going according to plan). This dynamic appeals to some, and not to others. It results in a purely tactical experience, with little in the way of strategy, as no resource management is required, and no long-term planning in the sense of choosing the order in which to build structures that grant access to technologies. Serious war-gamers, who prefer a 'more realistic' approach, should enjoy this game system.

So how does this game fail to please? The problem lies in the



uninspiring setting. Should we want to see modern warfare in the Middle East, all we need do is look up some recent history, or watch the news. *War on Terror* is most likely to appeal to hardcore war-gamers with a keen and specific interest in current geopolitical affairs. Those in search of a fascinating and fun setting would do better to rather consider games with more fictional back-stories. *War on Terror* is not actually bad, just rather unexciting. **NAG**

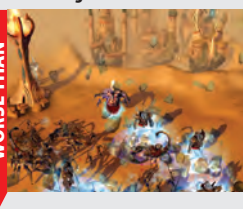
BOTTOM LINE

Would it be unfair to call this the RTS take on *Counter Strike*? We think not. It is generally just as uninspiring and lacking in flavour, but unlike the wildly popular first-person shooter, it is unlikely this title will attract the kind of cult popularity that *CS* enjoys.

63/100



Rise of Legends



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on Ps2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R259

Developer

High Voltage

Publisher

Eidos

Supplier

WWE (011) 462-0150

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

18

Specifications

Players: 1

Controllers: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

A solid game that is fun to play, but it's pretty short and fans will be in two minds over its accuracy and substance.

65/100

24

CLOSE TO



The Warriors

WORSE THAN



RESERVOIR DOGS

ONE HAS TO WONDER about licensing a fourteen-year-old cult-movie for a game. The timing isn't terrible. A substantial number of twenty-somethings are familiar with Tarantino's first movie. However, it raises two questions: do fans want to know that much about the movie background, and isn't there a better license for a game? The first concern is easily settled. Hardcore, close-minded fans might want to give it a skip. The game is an alternative re-telling of the movie instead of a complementary piece. While it's a good marketing hook, telling fans that the game gives more details on the failed diamond heist from the movie's background story is largely inaccurate. Instead, certain scenes and background events were expanded into game sessions that take players through the cast of characters.

Pretty much everyone in the movie get their turn in a section. Players will be able to experience Mr. Blue coming to his end, and control the mortally wounded Mr. Orange as he navigates traffic with blood in his eyes. Scenes include how Mr. Blonde kidnapped the cop and Mr. Pink recovering the diamonds he

hid. The movie material is used and elaborated on quite liberally. Fans will also be disappointed that the only voice and likeness is that of Michael Madsen, aka. Mr. Blonde - we'd have really liked to see at least Steve Buscemi and Harvey Keitel as well. Due to his premature death though, Chris Penn's role went to a competent voice actor, but unfortunately, Eddie Gabot doesn't have the same presence as Pink, White and Blonde.

Confused? Then it's likely you haven't seen the movie yet. On one hand, you are missing a crime cinema gem, but on the other, you don't need to know it in order to enjoy this game. *Reservoir Dogs* played out as the aftermath of a botched diamond heist in which the various criminals tried to figure out what went wrong. The events before the robbery, as well as the robbery itself, were told in flashback scenes, while in real-time the gangsters were trying to pick up the pieces and blamed each other in the aftermath. The game follows a similar pattern. Current-time scenes are CG cut-scenes, loosely following the movie. It would have been nice if the game used the actual movie footage,



but it was probably a rights issue as well. It appears that High Voltage had no support from the film's creators. Game sessions mostly take place in flashbacks and take on two styles. Most scenes involve a character trying to escape the robbery or do some task. Alternative sessions involve racing around town in a car against the clock. These missions in their style and variation are extremely similar to *GTA*. When you dig down to the bone, *Reservoir Dogs* isn't much more than smart game styles put together in a slick package. However, given the limited content to work with, not to mention avoiding the ire of fans, High Voltage had to be creative in how the game looks and feels.

While the driving sections are straightforward, players have a bit more option with the combat scenes. A character could go out, guns blazing, but this makes for a tougher experience as cops can call in reinforcements. To avoid being gunned down, the characters can take hostages and employ a few complementary moves, such as a slap with a pistol, to dissuade cops, security guards and SWAT officers to open fire. After an opponent lowers

his or her weapon, they can be directed to a wall or similar surface where they can crouch and not be a nuisance. This only lasts as long as the hostage doesn't die. Luckily, hostages are easy to find. From this approach, it's a thinking man's game, but the scenes can also become repetitive. Fortunately, the developers also created levels that are varied and interesting to navigate, not to mention good-looking. If anything, the game feels fleshed out and vibrant. Similar to other good license offerings, there's just enough substance to make the game work.

Sadly, it's all over pretty quickly. The game's levels and psycho/professional sliders give room for a little variation, and the levels have some branching roots in them. One could also mix the gunplay and hostage approaches up for some spice. The movie's great soundtrack is very present as well. To be honest, if the game only included actual movie footage and more of the actors, many of the liberties taken with the content material would be forgotten by most fans. In the end, *Reservoir Dogs* is fun and solid, but it's still too short and flat to put it in a better league. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R299

Developer

Ascaron Entertainment

Publisher

Ascaron Entertainment

Supplier

Megarom (011) 234-2680

Genre

Space flight sim

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 1.6GHz

Video: 128MB Graphics Card

RAM: 512MB RAM

HDD: 6.5GB HDD

CD/DVD: DVD-ROM

Internet: No

Players: 1

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NAG
EDITOR'S
CHOICE

BOTTOM LINE

Overall, this is an excellent and very entertaining game with a fairly engrossing story that has a couple of interesting twists. It does, however, suffer from a lack of multiplayer, and its replayability suffers as a result.

71/100

X3

BETTER THAN

Privateer

AS GOOD AS



DARKSTAR ONE

IN 1984, DAVID BRABEN'S *Elite* pioneered a game genre that has since proved fairly popular – space combat flight simulators with elements of trade, and the ability for the player to choose how to play the game. The *Wing Commander* series of games, several years later, was limited in that it only presented the combat aspect, with no mercantile element. This was rectified in *Wing Commander: Privateer*, which presented a couple of ships and several available weapon and ship upgrades. However, it wasn't until Microsoft's *Freelancer* that the genre enjoyed a game that offered players a multiplicity of options in just about every regard: available ships, ship equipment and weapons, cargo types, locations, even approaches to playing the game. Players could opt to accept missions offered by a large number of factions, trade goods (legal or contraband), engage in piracy, be vigilantes, conduct mining operations, side with governments or rebels, attain and maintain neutrality with everyone – just about anything imaginable. In addition, the game had multiplayer functionality on a massive scale.

It is quite apparent that both *Elite* and *Freelancer* served as inspiration for *DarkStar One*, as influences from both are evident in this title, and both of these classics will be referred to from time to time in this review.

A SCI-FI STORY

The overall plot has been put together by German science fiction author Claudia Kern. As a result, the game is very story-driven, and players will

encounter a number of characters along the way. The plot twists and turns somewhat, but we shall not divulge any plot elements, as this story is worth experiencing. The timeline is a clever blend of compulsory story events and periods of self-determined 'sandbox' play. The story missions must be completed in order to further the story. Some of these must be completed immediately, while others can be proceeded to at leisure, allowing the player to prepare first. While between story-critical missions, players can advance their characters in whatever way suits them best. Accepting assignments, hunting pirates, preying on mercantile vessels, engaging in commerce, escorting trade convoys, these are some of the options. During all this, players need to seek out certain alien artefacts. These allow the *DarkStar One* (the name of the ship that the player flies) to be upgraded.

Unlike most games of this ilk, *DarkStar One* doesn't afford the player the opportunity to buy new ships. This is because the player's ship is, from the start, potentially the best vessel around. It can be equipped with a variety of weapons, and can periodically be upgraded, as mentioned previously. Here, a certain role-playing element has been introduced. With every new ship upgrade level, the player is required to choose between improving the hull, wings or engines. Hull upgrades improve the number and power of turret-mounted weapons, as well as the ship's overall toughness (spending much on hull upgrades turns the *DarkStar One*



into quite the battleship!). Wing upgrades result in more and stronger fixed-mounted weapons, as well as enhancing the ship's manoeuvrability. Engine upgrades provide more power to subsystems, resulting in faster shield and weapon recharge, as well as allowing more optional systems to be equipped simultaneously. A combination of all three is generally the best, as it is pointless, for example, having maximum turret and weapon mounts with powerful weapons if the engines are unable to keep up with the energy requirements. In addition, every level the player can upgrade the plasma cannon, which, despite its name, is more often a defensive system than a weapon as such. It is capable of a variety of functions, which can be acquired by spending upgrades as desired.

OLD CONCEPTS, NEW PRESENTATION

The overall game dynamic is very reminiscent of both *Elite* and *Freelancer*. Just as in the ancient classic, the ship has a hyperspace jump range limit (which, unlike in the original, can gradually be upgraded). Each of the numerous systems has an eco-political profile, which details the predominant industry type, government model and technological advancement level. The first factor determines what goods are exportable, and which are imported, thus determining viable cargoes to and from the system. The political profile determines what sorts of goods are legal and which are banned, as well as influencing the general crime rate (i.e., the level of

piracy in the system). The technological level dictates what sort of equipment is available for purchase and how sophisticated it is, as well as influencing overall prices in comparison to galactic averages. This sort of system classification is identical to that found in *Elite*.

While in flight, the game displays parallels to *Freelancer's* control interface. Once again, a mouse interface is used, and the space bar is used to toggle between interacting with the heads-up display's icons and flying the ship. The key bindings are customisable, but the default bindings are perfectly serviceable. The 'WASD' movement control scheme is very accessible, and familiar to many gamers.

Combat is entertaining and sometimes quite intense, but many players will find that it is, overall, a bit too easy. Very seldom will a player find it necessary to restart or reload. On the upside, though, this means that dying can be very annoying, as it should be! Given the fact that one's ship is customisable, how a player handles situations will vary accordingly. Therefore, upgrade choices are effectively long-term strategic decisions - an aspect that is sometimes lacking in games of this type.

IN SPACE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM

This is, in fact, not true in this game. As is the case with every space game, sci-fi film or TV show, explosions make sounds, as do nearby ships and weapon fire. Although this is not realistic, we are likely not ready to experience the silence of the vacuum of space. The voice acting is rather good,

even though the accents are sometimes incongruous with the alien races uttering them. *DarkStar One's* musical score has been composed with considerable talent, and seems to pay homage to several sources. Some of the 'anthemic' pieces are a bit too suggestive of *Star Trek's* soundtrack, but sound appropriate. One of the tunes is reminiscent of one of the tracks in *Flatspace*, which is a quaint little 2D space flight combat game that captures elements of both *StarCon* and *Freelancer*.

This game delights in terms of its graphics. Given that the action takes place in the void of space, developers were able to spend much more time and effort in designing and rendering the various objects to be found in it, such as space ships, asteroids and space stations.

FINAL APPROACH

Our major criticism is *DarkStar One's* lack of multiplayer functionality. Granted, the dynamic nature of the universe's economy makes this difficult to implement, and the game's emphasis on story is also not very conducive, but today's audiences generally expect to be able to play with or against other players. Furthermore, once the game is played through to the (disappointingly anticlimactic) end, there is effectively no incentive to carry on playing, and it is likely to end up gathering dust on some shelf. In short, fans of *Freelancer* will find that, in some regards, this game is superior, while in others it falls short. Nevertheless, as a single-player experience, this title is most enjoyable, and we recommend it highly. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R199, \$19.95 on Steam

Developer

Valve

Publisher

EA/Valve

Supplier

EA/Steam

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

18

Specifications

CPU: 1.2 GHz

Video: DirectX 7 128MB video

RAM: 256 MB RAM

HDD: 1 Gb HDD

CD/DVD: CD-ROM

Internet: ep1.half-life.com

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Take it for what it is – a six-hour chapter in the ongoing episodic saga of *Half-Life 2* – and you won't be disappointed.

92/100

Sin: Episodes



Playing with Dog



HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1

"IT'S A COMBINE ZOMBIE. A Zombine! Get it?" Alyx looks at us, her face drawn in a smirk. Then she looks aside shyly, contemplating her pun and Gordon's usual non-response to anything she says. We move our mouse up and down, trying to nod enthusiastically, because we're chuckling with her. Sadly, Gordon's cold demeanour allows the moment to fade quickly, so we compose ourselves and rush into the next room. It's right after the closing events of *Half-Life 2* and the Citadel is ready to explode. Unfortunately, there isn't enough time for Alyx and Gordon to escape, so they need to get to the reactor and slow down the chain reaction.

This kick-starts *Episode 1*. The first chapter in a series of stories about Gordon, the Combine, crowbars and narrow crawl spaces. If there were any doubts about turning episodic, *Episode 1* puts them to rest. For a budget price, fans can expect 6+ hours of action and suspense that is arguably much more satisfying than even the entirety of *Half-Life 2*. In fact, *Episode 1* feels a lot like the original *Half-Life* with its focus on narrow corridors, surprise fire fights and environment puzzles. On top of that, it benefits from nice enhancements to the Source engine. The HDR effects from *Lost Coast* are commonplace and as a treat for those who finished *Half-Life 2*, the super-gravity gun is back for a longer stay.

However, shooting at soldiers and fixing reactors are all in a day's work for the scientist-turned-commando. The real terror starts when you try to leave the Citadel. With the details of an urgent Combine broadcast in Alyx's pocket, the two become hunted by the soldiers. The goal is to reach the trains, and that means traversing dilapidated buildings, factories and sewers, crawling with monsters you really don't want to meet. The Combine zombie is a particularly nasty foe, since it takes much more damage than the usual zombie and has a penchant for pulling out grenades.

Most of the game time involves navigating the levels, which means solving quite a few physics puzzles. None of these are obvious, but the game doesn't throw players into impossible situations either. An experienced player will cut through the game relatively quickly, but the end just leaves one wanting more. *Episode 1* is more of a *Half-Life 2* fix than a complete game and the episodic system is very accommodating. There aren't lots of new weapons and opponents, but instead, it's 'more of the same' with new approaches to the game dynamic. If anything, *Episode 1* shows that developers don't need to reinvent the wheel or find a new brand. Sometimes all it takes is a bit of spit and polish and a few new places to drive around.

Episode 2? We can't wait. **NAG**





+

SQUAD FOLLOWING

AMMO 1 9

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R299

Developer

Rebellion

Publisher

Sierra/Vivendi

Supplier

Midigital [011] 723-1967

Genre

Action/Strategy

Age Restriction

18

Specifications

Memory: 128MB

Wireless: 2 player

Game Sharing: No

Online: No

Players: 1-2



In two-player wireless, I got your back

MIAMI VICE

IT SEEMS THAT REVIVALS of 70s and 80s TV shows will keep reoccurring from time to time. These rehashes manifest in movies and, almost always these days, we also see videogame conversions at the same time, or shortly thereafter. Many of these nostalgic trips down memory lane fall flat, with outmoded concepts finding little favour with modern audiences. However, once in a while a title succeeds. Such is the case with *Miami Vice*, possibly because the theme of undercover narcotics officers battling drug syndicates from within is a timeless idea that doesn't depend on the hairstyles and fashions of its protagonists. The film has been fairly well received (though it is unlikely to attain any sort of 'classic' status), and a game conversion was inevitable.

This game surprises on a couple of counts (though, arguably less so after you have read this). At first glance, it appears to be a fairly ordinary shooter, suffering somewhat from a tricky control interface, particularly if you are used to playing shooters on a PC using a mouse. However, it soon becomes clear that this is not meant to be played 'gung-ho', but a certain degree of craftiness is advisable. The game adroitly recreates the atmosphere of police action films by the simple device of requiring players to take cover during shootouts, and to peek around to see whether the coast is clear, or to determine where the antagonists are located. The animation very faithfully captures the feel of such shootouts. Players navigate a mission, which is usually set in a location such as a mansion, dockyard or trailer park. Along the way, players will find enemies, contraband to confiscate, data to capture and med-kits to heal their wounds. The 'Select' button switches the view to a map, which is very useful in planning one's attack. Some missions provide a break from the run-and-gun action by placing the protagonist in a powerboat, chasing down the bad guys through swamps and marinas.

Nevertheless, this action element is but one part of this game's experience. Between missions, players have the opportunity to use confiscated 'evidence' (drugs of various kinds) to trade with contacts on the streets, or to bribe informants for useful information. Money can be spent on weapons and clothes. Yes, clothes. Two types of outfit are available: an expensive dress suit (in classic Don Johnson



style, from the original TV series) and a police armour suit. The former provides a reputation bonus after missions, while the latter grants additional health during missions. Health is self-explanatory – this influences the player's survivability. However, reputation has a use. Certain levels of reputation allow the player to interact with various underworld figures, allowing various bonuses to be gathered. It is also possible, between missions, to speak to an informant, or to carry out admin at the police station. The latter includes loading and saving games, interacting with the evidence room ('depository' where confiscated narcotics are stored) and hacking flash RAMs. These are chips that can be found during missions, and when hacked, unlock various upgrades, such as weapon improvements. Flash RAM hacking is where another of the game's surprises lies. In addition to the aforementioned action and economic strategy elements, *Miami Vice* also offers an arcade-style aspect. Hacking presents the player with a 2D playing field where geometric shapes interact in various ways, and a player's timing, reflexes and coordination determine success or failure. While it is very difficult to explain how this mini-game works, it is a lot of fun!

While *Miami Vice* is intrinsically a single-player game, it also supports two-player cooperative play over wireless link, though it requires both players to own copies of the game. The overall structure of the game is story-driven, with plot elements being delivered by means of rendered cut-scenes. The graphics are impressive, and the sound is decent, though the enemies' taunts (which are not for young audiences, by the way!) get rather monotonous after a while. This game offers a fairly long diversion with great diversity. **NAG**

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BOTTOM LINE

This is a very accomplished title that provides a varied and mix of game types. It can help pass the many hours, and is reasonably replayable.

74/100

Being a drug mule



Being Colin Farrell



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R439

Developer

SCEI

Publisher

SCEI

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre

Survival Horror

Age Restriction

18+

Specifications

Memory: 330KB

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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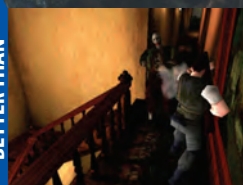
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BOTTOM LINE

A decent enough survival horror that's more *Silent Hill* than *Resident Evil*.

70/100

Resident Evil 3



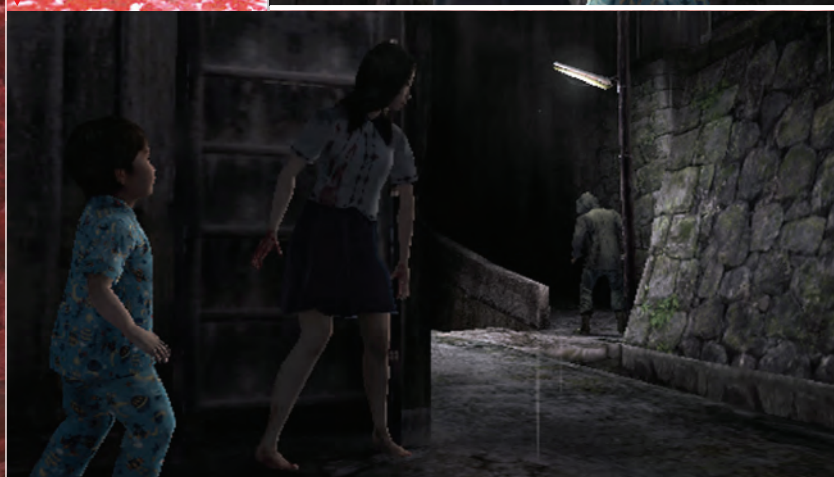
Silent Hill 2



FORBIDDEN SIREN 2

THE ORIGINAL *FORBIDDEN SIREN* didn't make much of a splash, but still managed to net itself a sequel to appease those who enjoyed the first title. Once again, the events take place on Yamijima Island and involve much sneaking around. This time around, the range of controllable characters includes a blind novelist and his seeing-eye dog, a magazine editor there to cover the mysterious events from the first game, as well as a fortuneteller and fugitive. You play these characters in turn, depending on what you do inside the various missions. *Forbidden Siren* set itself apart with its unique timeline-based mission structure, where, much like TV drama *Lost*, the events don't unfold in linear fashion. The 15:00 mission for the blind novelist, for example, may unlock an 11:00 mission with the fugitive. The premise is involved and invigorating on its own. The pull to see the correlation between each of the characters is strong, especially in such a *non-sequitur* circumstance.

The sequel draws all its strengths from its predecessor, but also most of its weaknesses. The control scheme and mechanics behind controlling your character, swapping to the viewpoints of enemies and such, still remain cumbersome almost to a fault. If you can look past the controls and focus more on the experience and underlying plot (which teeters around like most Japanese plots do, making sense one minute and then dropping into *Silent Hill*-like obscurity), that's when *Forbidden Siren 2* looks at its best. If you're not a fan of control schemes that involve making beeping sounds when you back your character up, try before you buy. As with any survival horror, it all boils down to taste. If *Forbidden Siren* had to be placed on the chart of survival horrors, it would sit quite comfortably between *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*, leaning more towards the *Silent Hill* side of things. **NAG**



PlayStation®2



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R499

Developer

7 Studios

Publisher

Ubisoft

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

3+

Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1-2

Players: 1-2

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BOTTOM LINE

A poorly done and shoddy game, rescued because, by cloning *God of War*, it's pretty playable, and it has Depp's voice for Sparrow

50/100

Pirates of the Caribbean

BETTER THAN

God of War

WORSE THAN



Yes, you seem to kill a lot of twins



PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE LEGEND OF JACK SPARROW

LET'S GET THIS OVER with: *The Legend of Jack Sparrow* isn't a good game. There are plenty of reasons why you wouldn't want it. It's pretty buggy and causes many moments of frustration. The animation, character models, levels and missions are either mediocre or uninspiring – sometimes both. On top of all of this, the game isn't challenging at all.

You might recall that the first game was really Bethesda's *Sea Dogs II*, re-branded to give fans the movie experience. However, it lacked one essential element – the swaggering Keith Richards impersonation that is Jack Sparrow. Still, the sales were solid, and a sequel to coincide with the second movie was inevitable. Nevertheless, you might have noticed that the game isn't called *Dead Man's Chest*. Instead of trying to keep pace with changing movie scripts and eke action sequences out of dramatic scenes, Bethesda instead opted for some Jack Sparrow back-story. Jack and Will are caught and about to be executed, but Jack tries to talk his way out of it by telling tales of his past (because he is really just an innocent victim). It's an excuse to explore tales such as Jack crossing the sea on the backs of two turtles. As a boon, Johnny Depp supplies Jack's voice and you play as Jack Sparrow.

This and one other thing save the game from being a complete disaster. You can't help but notice that *Legend of Jack Sparrow* is a blatant *God of War* clone. It's an action title. Jack and one cohort (Will or Elizabeth) run around, beating up bad guys who come in three varieties: archer, soldier and bigger-than-soldier. There are two attacks, heavy and normal, and collecting gold from fallen foes can be used to upgrade these attacks, as well as purchase new combo movements – not that you'd ever need them. The game can be played simply by bashing buttons and occasionally using the block feature. The game supports co-op, but the second player is practically immortal. While Jack's character can only die five times in a given section, the second player resurrects without fail. The game AI also occasionally ignores the second character.

The irony here is that by copying Kratos's world, *Pirates of the Caribbean* is fun to play. Stupid, easy, dull and at times frustrating, but still fun. It's the kind of game you'd be glad you didn't pay for, but you'd enjoy playing it anyway. That gives away the audience the game is meant for. If you are reading NAG, you're not interested in this game. However, if you make your selections from the short reviews in a men's magazine, it'll keep you entertained. **NAG**





VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R299

Developer

Frozenbyte

Publisher

Reef Entertainment

Supplier

Greenstone [021] 557-6248

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

CPU: 2.0GHz

Video: GeForce FX 5900 Ultra / Radeon 9500 Pro

RAM: 512MB RAM

HDD: 1GHz

CD/DVD: x4

Online: No

Players: 1-2

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BOTTOM LINE

No school like the old school, especially with modern-day graphical conventions

80/100

SHADOWGROUNDS

WHEN IT COMES TO first impressions, games tend to be judged by the box, demo, or Website. If one had to judge *Shadowgrounds* by its box, a cynical eyebrow is probably all you would get. The game itself, however, deserves much more attention, especially considering how well it pulls off what it attempts to do.

The basics of the game involve an old school top-down perspective. Arrow keys move you around, while the mouse determines where you are aiming. From there, you find weapons, aliens and NPC allies amidst the slightly contrived, but still entertaining plot. Weapons can be upgraded once you have enough points, which are gained by killing aliens. There is a wide variety of weapons and the upgrades are both sensible and explosive - especially for the grenade launcher. The weapons avoid frivolity, thanks to some rather intelligent aliens and their larger counterparts. The aliens have a penchant for avoiding the beam of your flashlight, hiding around corners or flanking you in the dark. The larger aliens can actually break down doors along corridors, pushing them apart with convincing animosity.

Most of the charm of *Shadowgrounds* stems from the nostalgic feel of the game, combined with crisp visuals that accurately cast shadows from your flashlight. Under such circumstances, it is not uncommon to unload your entire arsenal into a room before realising that you were shooting the shadow of a pot plant.

The bossfights are often frantic, though not overly difficult, due to the respawn system the game implements. You get up to four respawns, which simply places you slightly away from whatever killed you. Use up the four and you have to start from the beginning of the level. Unfortunately, you cannot quick save anywhere. The game only saves once a level has been completed - something that modern gamers may dislike intensely.

A much-appreciated cooperative mode has been included, although it requires a gamepad to work, since both players play on one PC. Longevity of *Shadowgrounds* has been enhanced with a recently released Level Editor found on the official Website (www.shadowgroundsgame.com), along with mod support.

Thanks to a recent patch (v1.04 - on the NAG cover DVD), most of the crash issues in *Shadowgrounds* have been resolved. **NAG**

BUDGET TOP 20



1. Far Cry



2. Age of Empires Gold Edition



3. CSI: Crime Scene Investigation



4. CSI: Miami



5. Zoo Tycoon



6. The Settlers: Heritage of Kings



7. Silent Hunter III



8. Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002



9. CSI: Dark Motives



10. Scrabble 2005 Edition



11. Brothers in Arms



12. Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield Gold Edition



13. Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow



14. Playboy The Mansion Gold Edition



15. Myst IV Revelation



16. Microsoft Train Simulator



17. Combat Flight Simulator 2



18. Impossible Creatures



19. Motocross Madness 2



20. Pacific Fighters

R99 each

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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

■ Suggested Retail Price

R321

■ Developer

Nintendo

■ Publisher

Nintendo

■ Supplier

Nintendo SA [011] 256-7760

■ Genre

Platformer

■ Age Restriction

12+

■ Specifications

Wi-Fi: No

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BOTTOM LINE

It's girly, but it's still a good game. Your girlfriend may like it more, though.

71/100

SUPER PRINCESS PEACH

WELL, WELL, SEEMS THE hero pants are now worn by Princess Peach. Mario, Luigi and some Toads have been captured by Bowser using a magic wand that controls emotions, and it's up to cake-baking Peach to save them. It is clear that *Super Princess Peach* is aimed at first-time platform gamers, as well as those of the female persuasion, which works both for and against it.

On the touch screen, four moods are displayed. Switching to Joy makes Peach happy and she can fly. Rage turns Peach into a flaming invincible earthquake-generating wrath, while Gloom makes her cry and run faster. Her tears can make plants grow. The final mood is Calm, which restores the life meter. Each mood drains a meter, which is replenished by finding items.

Peach is accompanied by Perry the parasol, who acts as a weapon and allows you to float across bodies of water. In each level, you find jigsaw puzzle pieces and coins. The latter is used to purchase upgrades and items at the store.

The game is quirky and colourful, and the controls are impeccable. There are over 72 stages, nothing to scoff at, while the unlockable mini-games add some variety. The only real criticism is one of difficulty, or the utter lack of it. With the Joy emotion, it's almost impossible to die, and the boss fights are made overly



easy due to hints giving much of the challenge away.

There is no telling if this is the start of a new franchise for Nintendo or if we'll see Peach in a hero roll again - at least for once Bowser didn't kidnap the princess. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

■ Suggested Retail Price

R489

■ Developer

Nintendo

■ Publisher

Nintendo

■ Supplier

Nintendo SA [011] 256-7760

■ Genre

Mini-Games

■ Age Restriction

None

■ Specifications

Wi-Fi: Eight players game share

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BOTTOM LINE

Good, colourful and fun mini-games, but the appeal soon wears off.

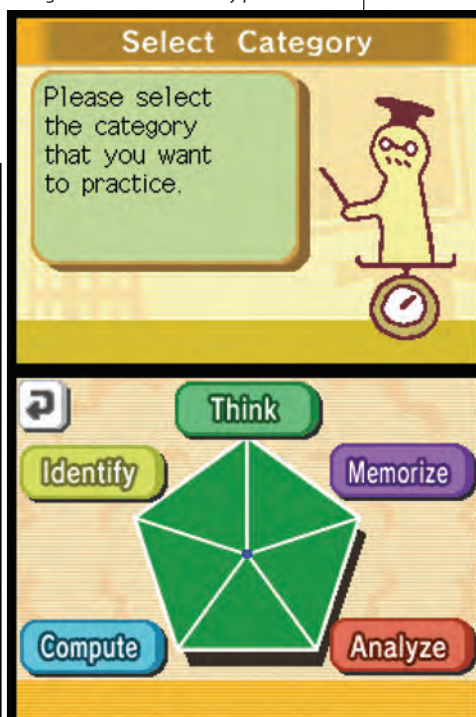
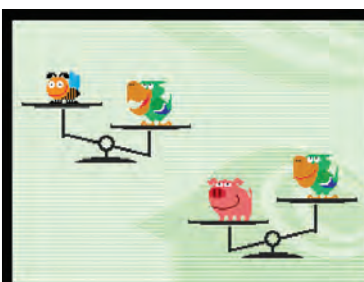
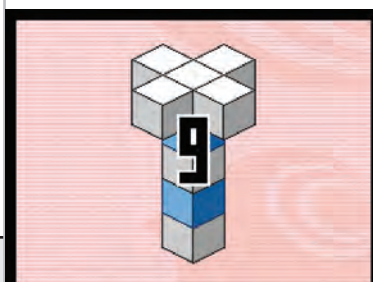
70/100

BIG BRAIN ACADEMY

IF ANYTHING THREW SAND in the face of the argument that games make you stupid, it was *Brain Age*, the clever puzzle title for the DS. It forms part of Nintendo's new Touch Generations line, which are cheaper titles with a bit more creativity (*Nintendogs* is another member of this range). *Big Brain Academy* is the latest train-your-brain game. You might be tempted to call it a *Brain Age* meets WarioWare clone, if it were not that Nintendo produced it as well. In *Big Brain Academy*, you are judged by your brain weight. The game is split into different types of challenges, each with a set of mini-games. In each, you can win bronze, silver, or gold and switch between three difficulties. The activities themselves differ a lot: from memory puzzles and sound matching, to building shapes out of pieces and guiding

an animal to its mate by connecting grid lines. In this sense, *Big Brain Academy* is more comprehensive than *Brain Age*, as well as more colourful. It's a lot of fun to play the mini-games, and one cartridge can support eight players in multiplayer.

However, it lacks a definite daily test system. Any of the games at any difficulty can be played at any time, which means you over-play and soon become bored, or you finish the game prematurely. Therefore, there's little of a regime training aspect, which makes this more of a game than a useful daily puzzle activity. The novelty wears off soon, but it's good while it lasts. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R369

Developer

Tecmo

Publisher

Take Two Interactive

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre

Action puzzle

Age Restriction

7+ (PEGI)

Specifications

Memory: 352KB

Wireless: No

Online: No

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

This is a challenging and rather fun to play game with a rather obscure, yet novel, play dynamic.

61/100

TOKOBOT

HERE IS A PECULIAR little game that could only have appeared on a console – a handheld one, at that. The basic premise is a rather grandiose story of powerful ancient races with advanced technologies, and the introductory sequence depicts this in an almost pompous fashion. So it feels quite odd when the game itself starts and the overall style and presentation turn out to be a cross between anime and children's cartoons, with a very juvenile feel to them. However, make no mistake, this doesn't detract from the game's charm, and it is quite suitable for young audiences. Very young children, however, may find it rather difficult at times. In fact, even adults will occasionally find it frustratingly tricky!

The player takes on the role of a young protagonist who is exploring ancient ruins with the help of a small retinue of 'tokobots', which are bizarre little robots that are, apparently, the legacy of the aforementioned powerful ancient civilisation. The tokobots can link with each other and the hero to perform various moves, such as linking in a straight and rigid line to be able to whip down forcefully or to span chasms or provide a ladder of sorts. They can also link together in a compact ring, delivering great force when landing after a jump. These and other link configurations depend on what formation the tokobots are deployed in, and this can be adjusted on the fly. In fact, these factors make up most of this game's action, which can be described as 'action puzzle' or borderline 3D platform.

As is the case with most console titles, games can only be saved at predetermined locations. The game's graphics are charming in a cartoon-like fashion, while the sound effects are



nothing spectacular, but has an almost annoyingly catchy soundtrack. Most adults will find this game to be frustratingly difficult while lacking in depth, but younger players may well be entranced by the puzzling nature of the obstacles. **NAG**

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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Gameloft

Publisher

Gameloft

Supplier

www.thumbtribe.co.za

Genre

Platform

Download Code

SMS: tribe 703291 to 40014

NB: make sure you leave a space after the word **tribe**.

Check www.thumbtribe.co.za

for phone compatibility and downloading instructions.

TROPICAL MADNESS

WHERE WOULD THE PLATFORM genre be without cute, furry creatures? Games that involve jumping, running and action, all for the sake of picking up orbs or coins at sometimes confusing spots, boast all kinds of fur-laden heroes such as Sonic, Crash, and Conker. Thus, enter another one; the mobile-only adventures of Furrto the squirrel. Called a living fur ball, he runs, jumps, turns into a ball, smacks his enemies, and collects stars. However, *Tropical Madness* is a stand-out title for a few reasons. If you have a top-end mobile phone, it looks great, and the cutesy, colourful graphics quickly make you forget where Furrto got his inspiration. Nine levels take players through three locations and finally a boss to beat, suggesting we'll see more of Furrto in the



future. The isometric graphics are crisp, definitely setting a standard for this type of game on phones. Hopefully we'll see more platform games of this quality released soon. **NAG**

A solid and good-looking platformer 90/100



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

MIG

Publisher

In-Fusio

Supplier

www.thumbtribe.co.za

Genre

Sport

Download Code

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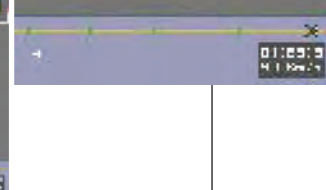
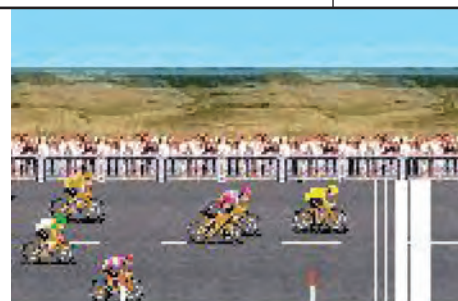
for phone compatibility and downloading instructions.

TOUR DE FRANCE 06

VISUALLY, *TOUR DE FRANCE 06* isn't much to look at. It doesn't excel in the sound department, either. On top of that, it involves cycling, a sport you either follow passionately or don't care about at all. So why do we like this game? Cycling titles have always been a challenge, since mimicking the sport is a bit hard. Developers often risk getting gamers to tap buttons at rhythms for stretches of time, which becomes tedious before too long. In-Fusio decided to take a different approach. In this game, left and right determines your rider's speed, while up and down determines his position. The trick is to keep up with the pack as much as possible, otherwise your stamina or morale can take a knock. Timing is important, and power-ups can be picked up to improve performance (including some help from team members). The game demands timing and strategy, otherwise you

lose. Luckily, you don't need to win every track, and the game covers the entire Tour de France, including the stages in the Netherlands and Belgium. **NAG**

Wide in scope and uses a clever interface 85/100



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Cybiko Wireless

Publisher

In-Fusio

Supplier

www.thumbtribe.co.za

Genre

Management

Download Code

SMS: tribe 703193 to 40014

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Check www.thumbtribe.co.za

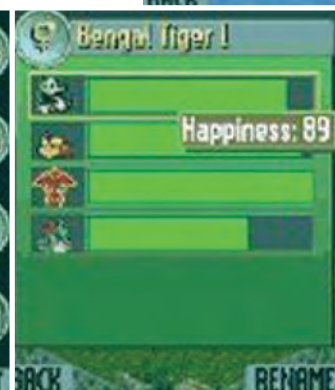
for phone compatibility and downloading instructions.

ZOO TYCOON 2 MOBILE

MOBILE GAMES HAVE RADICALLY evolved from top-down shooters and navigating a snake around to eat pixels. Management games have started to surface on the platform, and developers are hard at work trying to bring aspects of strategy and tycoon games to the small screen. Unfortunately, as you might figure, this is easier said than done, and in general, many of the resulting titles have fallen well short of the genre. Unfortunately, despite a good attempt, *Zoo Tycoon 2* also falls short. The basics of running a zoo, as with the PC game, depend on the happiness of your zoo's creatures. This is done by checking the animal and pressing a corresponding button to make it happy - be it feeding, petting, medicine, or something else. In return, your score - the money your zoo makes - goes up. However, there is no control over the business aspect, nor

do you see zoo visitors. In fact, all you really do is click buttons to make the animals you bought happy. This means that *Zoo Tycoon 2* is simplified to manage various, but basic Tamagotchis, with most of the management elements of the original removed. **NAG**

Very flat and basic for a tycoon game 55/100





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HARDWARE

HARDWARE INDEX

TECHNOLOGY FEATURE

104 Interview with AMD's Gaith Kadir

AMD has been dominating the press of late, with all the news and pure speculation regarding what we can expect of the new entity after the ATI acquisition. We caught up with head honcho Dr Gaith Kadir at the Rev F launch party to get a glimpse of the future as AMD perceives it.

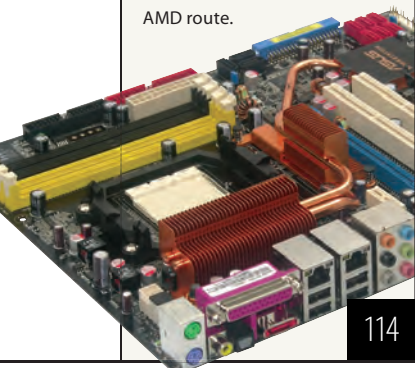
REVIEWS

106	Asus P5B
108	Fujitsu Siemens Computers Amilo X-series
110	Palit 7600 GT
111	ADATA Vitesta Extreme Edition DDR2
112	Trust 5.1 gaming headphones
113	IDE media player
122	Lazy Gamers Guide - Microsoft Habu Gaming Mouse

H@RDCORE3 ROUNDUP

114 The second coming?

It's an AMD-dominated issue this month. With the company recently adopting DDR2 memory technology with its Socket M2 range of processors, we figured it was the perfect time to put nine AM2 motherboards to the test in our H@rdcor3 roundup to find out what the DDR2 DIMMs have done for the platform, and which AM2 board would be the best choice for a gamer going the AMD route.



PARTNERS, PARTNERS, EVERYWHERE!

WHEN WE LOOK BACK on 2006 for its defining characteristic regarding the IT industry's march into the future, the year will be most instantly recognisable for all of its intriguing deals!

The AMD/ATI hook-up is sure to have an enormous impact on the sector as soon as the company settles into its new, merged skin. We expect this 'processing powerhouse' to start releasing some momentous and groundbreaking products from as early as Q1 2007, but 2006 is the year that the move actually happened.

And more recently, we had two of the biggest names in the component market – in the end-user business, at least – joining efforts in a venture, which, again, will start shipping products as soon as next year. Asus and Gigabyte are both powerful brands, well respected in the motherboard industry in particular, and

the next major announcement would be chip giant Intel, but in all honesty, this mammoth of the IT sector doesn't really need to partner with anyone. If anything, it could be argued that the company has already made its move in collaborating with Apple to bring us Intel-based Macs.

Meanwhile, Dell continues to grow and strengthen its ties with Intel rival AMD, a telling move for an organisation that, until only recently, remained an Intel-only brand.

In other important industry moves, AMD has revealed its latest architecture based on the new Socket M2 and the inclusion of a DDR2-capable MCH in its Athlon range of desktop CPUs, but the performance gains over the older CPU and platform just aren't there yet. A Socket 939 FX-60 with quick overlocker's DDR modules in fact outperforms the

THE OBVIOUS PLACE TO LOOK FOR THE NEXT MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENT WOULD BE CHIP GIANT INTEL, BUT IN ALL HONESTY, THIS MAMMOTH OF THE IT SECTOR DOESN'T REALLY NEED TO PARTNER WITH ANYONE

with a wide range of products with excellent reputations. ECS and Foxconn may dominate in the volume OEM market thanks to their highly cost-effective methods and massive economies of scale, but neither has as strong a brand as either Asus or Gigabyte.

The new joint venture is not a hostile takeover, nor is it an acquisition or merger. In effect, it is a new company with Asus holding 49% of the shares, and Gigabyte the remaining 51%. This 'new' player will be able to combine the strengths of both companies, strengthening their combined position in the market through consolidation and optimisation of the manufacturing process.

Even Microsoft has been signing partners, and has collaborated with gaming gurus Razer on its newest incarnation of the venerable IntelliMouse Explorer. The new offering will feature Razer technology in a Microsoft package and should sell in the millions.

SO WHAT'S NEXT?

Well, the funny thing is that any more moves to tie up with a suitable partner are, at this point, as difficult to call as either of the big ones already mentioned. The obvious place to look for

FX-62 in most disciplines, albeit very marginally. Faster DDR2 DIMMs close the gap somewhat, but the fact remains that the underlying technology is really underwhelming at best.

Meanwhile, Intel's Conroe architecture is anything but, and continues to set benchmark record after benchmark record. The Core 2 Duo range, as it's officially known, is a technical revolution, and secures the technology driving seat for the enormous CPU-producing entity. However, that's not the whole story.

In the gaming and enthusiast market in particular, it seems it will take more than clear technical superiority to break a long-standing dedication to AMD products, despite a clear and definite performance advantage. Also, remember that it was AMD's technical leadership position that led to its complacency of recent years, so if the company hits hard and fast, which it has the potential to do now, it could capitalise on any similar weaknesses in Intel's armour and turn it all around again early next year.

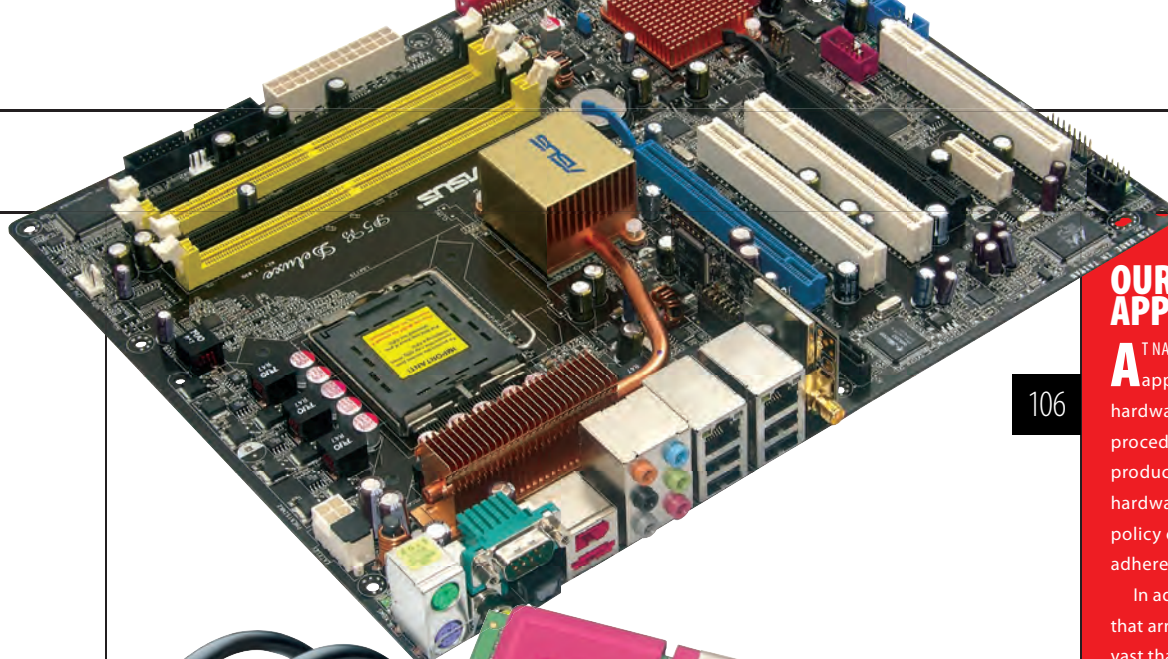
2006 will be known as the year in which the groundwork was laid for 2007, a year that is shaping up to be incredibly interesting if these early indicators are anything to go by.

Russell Bennett

AWARDS

THE NAG HARDWARE AWARD is reserved for those products that really blow us away, whether by virtue of sheer grunt, value for money, or pure unspecified sexiness. This award will only be bestowed upon products that really stand out, even to our somewhat jaded and cynical eyes, and should be considered among the primary choices when purchasing products in the respective categories. Products that receive this accolade are beyond a doubt rather special. So watch out for them and take note!





OUR HARDWARE APPROACH

AT NAG, WE HAVE a very malleable approach to testing the latest hardware for you, and we define the test procedures on a more or less product-by-product basis. Due to the wide range of hardware we are asked to review, a single policy cannot be laid out and strictly adhered to.

In addition, the number of products that arrive at our office every month is so vast that it's only a prime selection that even reaches these printed pages you read. We also try to include the hardware that PC and gaming enthusiasts would like to find out more about.

Therefore, at NAG our review process, although rooted in a technical background and based on solid benchmark data, is largely objective and as such, is our objective opinion of the samples we receive. Moreover, we've been exposed to so much technology in our collective years in this vocation that these opinions are, we like to believe, among the most educated in the country.

So we run all the requisite benchmarks, like FutureMark's synthetic 3DMark series, the latest system-heavy gaming titles (*F.E.A.R.* and *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* are two that spring to mind right off the bat), and more specialised benchmarking suites like Everest (specifically for RAM performance) and SiSoft Sandra 2005, which is very good at measuring CPU performance.

What's most important to us is that we get a detailed impression of the reality of using the equipment being reviewed. While that impression naturally includes 'The Numbers' from the various benches, these don't always reflect the absolute, final verdict. It's possible that we, from time-to-time, prefer a package that may not score the highest during testing, and where that is the reality, we'll explain our rationale.

After all, our goal is to provide you, the reader, with the most accurate information about how satisfied you will be with your purchase.

So enjoy reading about the latest and greatest hardware in the pages to follow, which we have slaved over so that you can make the most educated choice possible in your next hardware purchase.

106



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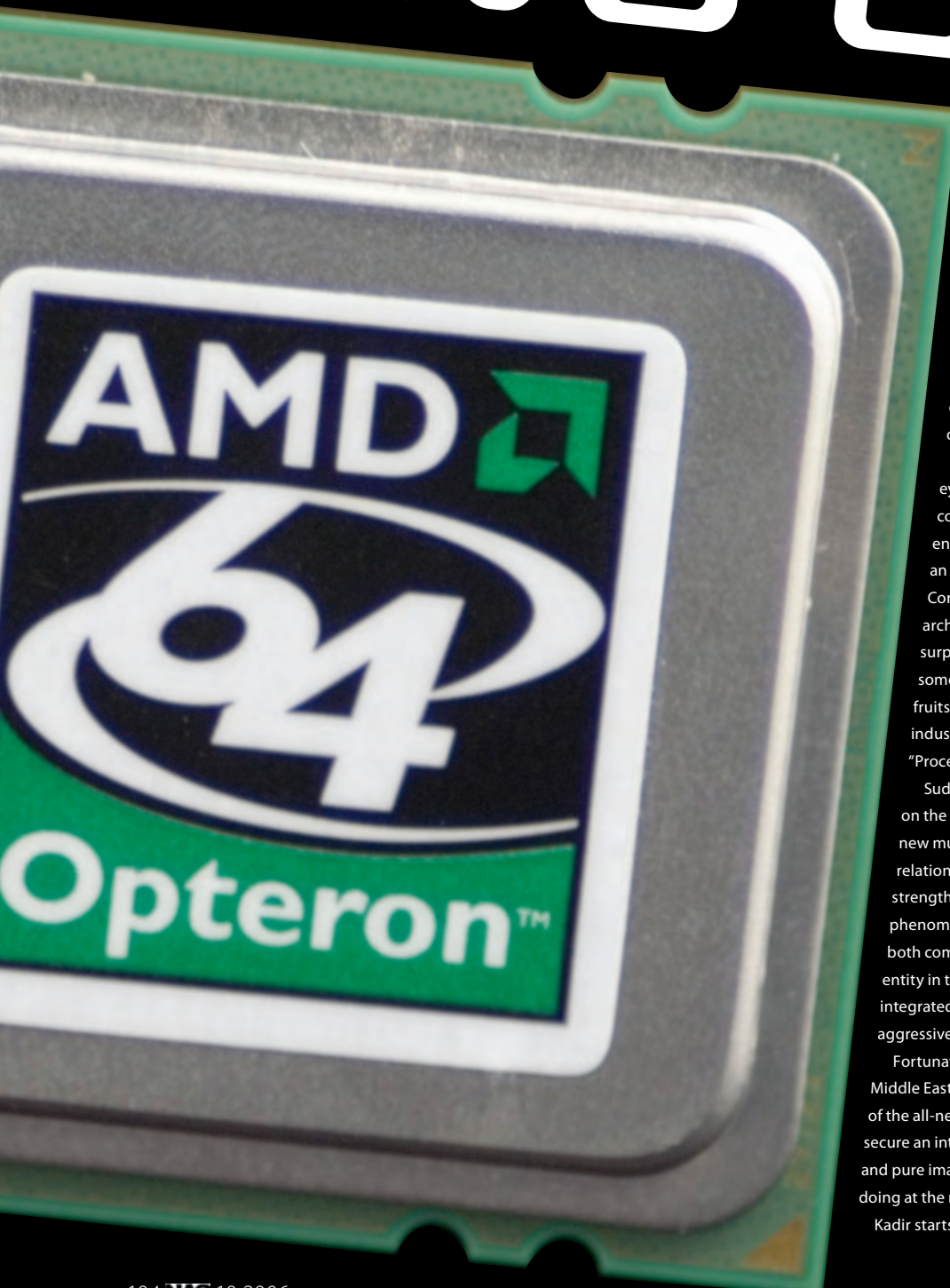


112



108

AMD REVS UP!



IN THE LAST FEW months, the industry has been going through some crazy times. New technology, updated news on future technologies, and a resumption of the all-out battle in the CPU and platform arena have shaken the gaming and enthusiast sectors up dramatically. And for those of us who from time-to-time risk opinions on the near future, it's been a time of keeping on one's toes, constantly searching for information and then confirmation of the news, and keeping up with the hectic pace of change.

Everyone involved in the ICT industry has their eyes focussed on the CPU giants. This critical component of a PC lives up to its acronym by being entirely central to the platform of choice. Intel made an enormous splash with its runaway success, the Core 2 Duo line-up. However, it isn't always the best architecture that wins in this kind of scenario. In a surprise move and with the side-effect of stealing some of Intel's Conroe thunder, AMD revealed the fruits of its efforts with GPU guru ATI, and the stunned industry was flooded with the potential of this new "Processing powerhouse," as the two entities phrased it.

Suddenly, just having the fastest standalone CPU on the planet isn't quite enough in the face of this new multi-headed threat. AMD has always had a good relationship with NVIDIA, and Intel isn't known for its strengths in graphics, so a GPU COU tie-up could be a phenomenal USP in the tired marketplace. Moreover, with both companies voicing the potential impact of the new entity in the mobile sector, with hints of the future of an integrated processing platform, AMD is clearly making an aggressive play for larger market share.

Fortunately, at about this time, AMD's regional VP for the Middle East and Africa, Gaith Kadir, visited SA for the launch of the all-new Opteron range, dubbed Rev F. NAG was able to secure an interview with him, to clarify some of the rumours and pure imagination that cover everything the company is doing at the moment.

Kadir starts with important news for the local AMD user

base. The company is moving back into the SA market, and will be opening a satellite HQ in Johannesburg within the next few months. "The number one reason for this move," he explains, "is to meet our partners and customers' demands in this extremely strategic market. We need to make sure we are addressing the SA market directly and in a responsive fashion."

AMD's latest desktop processor range, targeted at the gaming segment, is the AM2 for Socket 940 motherboards. These chips continue in the naming tradition of the Athlon X2, now stretching to a 5200+ and an FX-62 as the enthusiast part. However, the biggest difference over older Socket 939 chips isn't the higher clock speed, it's the integration of a DDR2 RAM controller onto the die. However, Intel's move to DDR2 saw a relatively slow adoption of the new technology. Is AMD doing any better?

"The transition to DDR2 is very successful. OEMs, distributors, and end-users have all been moving to the newer 940-pin socket very quickly, which is encouraging. We at AMD saw that right now was the time to move to the newer standard. The price/performance ratio is right, and the bandwidth advantage over DDR is clear."

Much of the hesitation behind the move to DDR2, when Intel first launched, was about performance being worse than that of DDR. At just 533MHz, DDR2 had barely any bandwidth advantage over high-end DDR parts, and much higher latencies, and it cost substantially more than older DIMMs too. Therefore, AMD has judged this transition well, as DIMMs of 800MHz or more are now commonly available, and clock frequencies this high deliver fantastic bandwidth improvements.

"AMD has really, since [the] inception of [the] Opteron in 2003, focussed on getting both the performance and power consumption of our products right, and I believe it's now being shown that again AMD really did the right thing. Just look at the price of oil today, \$80 per barrel now - so power consumption is critical!"

When the company revealed three different flavours of this server-orientated CPU, a 35W, 65W and 95W model, its market share in the small to medium server space grew to 48%. These lower-powered Opterons became a firm favourite of data-centres everywhere almost immediately, as the fixed infrastructure of these expensive locations makes the upgrading of power supply very difficult, not to mention costly. By deploying servers that do more work but consume less power, the existing power supply is often sufficient, so the low-power versions became a cost savings vehicle.

Finally, we get to the \$5.4 billion transaction between AMD and the ATI.

"This transaction was born from a mutual recognition of great strengths with no overlap whatsoever - the two companies literally complement each other! So it became about three things. It's about growth, which is where we're headed, about innovation and ensuring we remain on the leading edge, and it's about offering the consumer a choice and building a healthier market through competition," says Kadir.

"We see the new entity having great potential and a chance to see massive market growth in the mobile space. Both companies have existing technology that just fits together, and the market projections for mobile computing are off the chart, so we will definitely be leveraging ATI's strength there. We believe that this will be a very successful marriage and should lead to immediate successes in the notebook market."

ATI has integrated chipsets for the mobile space across the value range, from high-end desktop replacement notebooks



"IT'S ABOUT GROWTH, WHICH IS WHERE WE'RE HEADED, ABOUT INNOVATION AND ENSURING WE REMAIN ON THE LEADING EDGE, AND IT'S ABOUT OFFERING THE CONSUMER A CHOICE AND BUILDING A HEALTHIER MARKET THROUGH COMPETITION"

to entry-level machines. AMD's range of mobile processors, coupled with these GPU solutions, could indeed become a powerful force in the sector shortly.

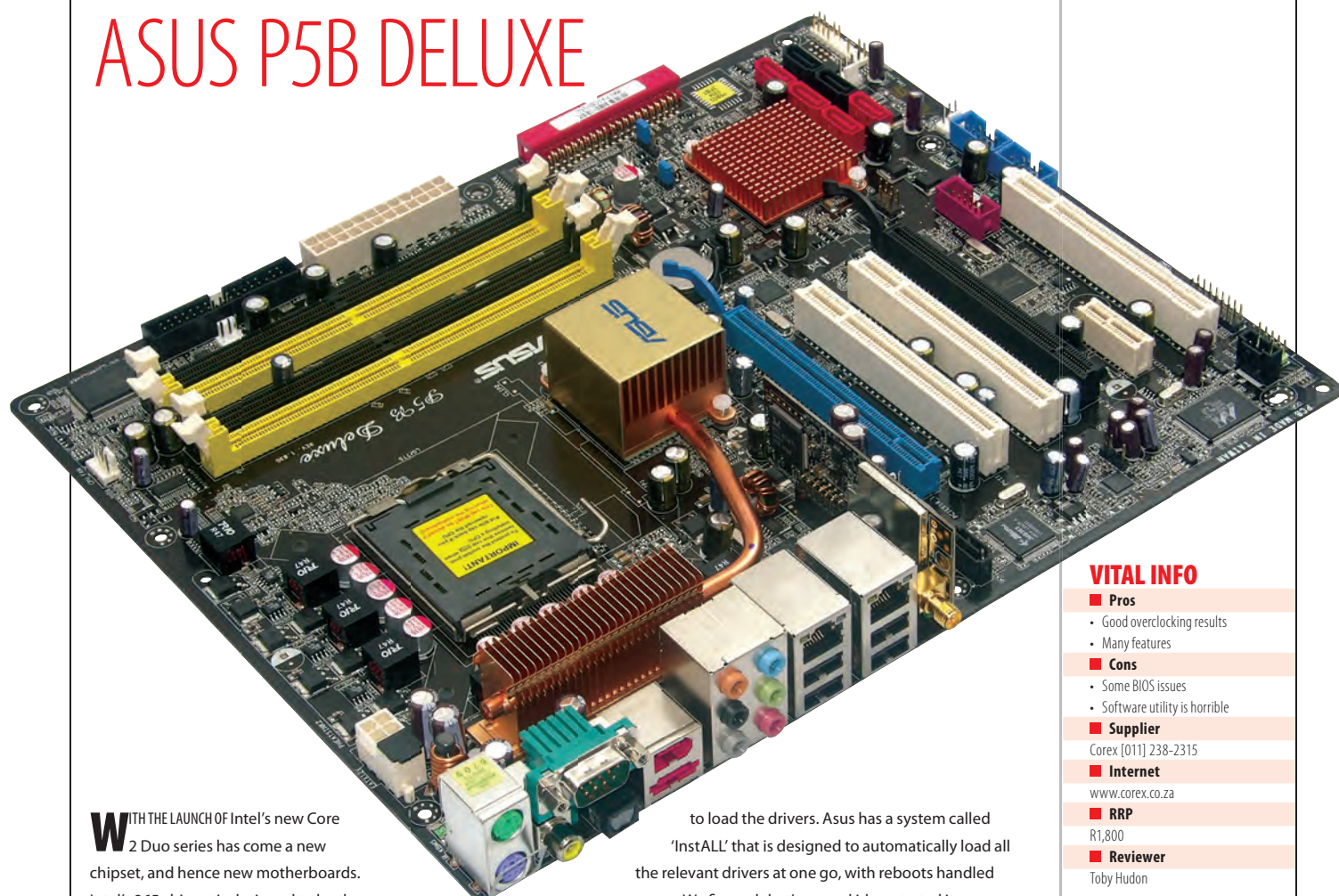
AMD's success in the server market has led to an expansion of cooperation with giant vendor Dell. The direct-model company has added a two-CPU and four-CPU Opteron variant to its server line-up, and ought to have desktops based on AMD64 processors out within the next month - or probably by the time you read this article!

Certainly, the SA gaming and enthusiast sectors have already demonstrated their support for the company frequently dubbed "... the upstart CPU builder," with AMD market share leaping from 10% to 15% in the second quarter this year. This 50% growth in market share comes from all sectors, and is a stark indicator of the loyalty of SA punters to the underdog brand.

"Everyone, from our own employees within the organisation to close working partners like NVIDIA, right down to our customer base, has been very positive about the merger since we announced it. And we are getting on very well with the process of integrating the two entities under a united banner. We are without a doubt creating one of the global technology leaders of the future from our two comparatively small companies. Through our approach of open innovation and fair approach to every market we play in, we have no doubt that the AMD age is on its way," Kadir states in conclusion. **NAG**

HARDWARE

ASUS P5B DELUXE



WITH THE LAUNCH of Intel's new Core 2 Duo series has come a new chipset, and hence new motherboards. Intel's 965 chipset is designed to be the mainstream Core 2 Duo platform. However, this hasn't stopped manufacturers from creating high-end overclocking platforms using it.

Asus's P5B Deluxe is one of the first 965 boards out. It comes with numerous features such as high-definition audio and RAID. Asus also added a few interesting things such as its Q-connector, which is long overdue in addressing the problem of the case power, reset, and LED wires. In addition, since the version we tested was the Wi-Fi-AP version, it included wireless Ethernet onboard. This is quickly becoming a popular option on the more expensive motherboards at the high-end of the market. The P5B also has an 8-phase power design, which Asus had excellent success with on earlier boards, for delivering high overclocking and improved stability. Like most of the other 965-based boards we've seen, this one supports Crossfire and not SLI. Whether or not NVIDIA will release drivers to change that remains doubtful.

This board also uses a completely silent heatpipe design to cool the chipset. Asus includes an optional fan that can snap onto the passive sink in case you opt for a fan-less solution for your CPU like water-cooling, so that there can still be airflow to cool the motherboard in the case. Asus claims its Stack Cool system moves most of the heat to the underside of the board. We didn't run into much of a heat problem with the board itself during testing, so it apparently works well enough.

One thing that doesn't work very well is the bundled software on the CD. Upon installing the new board, we put in the CD

to load the drivers. Asus has a system called 'InstALL' that is designed to automatically load all the relevant drivers at one go, with reboots handled as necessary. We figured that's a good idea, started it up, and let it run. When we came back a little while later, we found the system was unbootable. Even safe mode wouldn't load properly. Fortunately, we managed to get the last known good configuration to load, and then proceeded to load the drivers manually. We had a bit of trouble finding the driver for one of the Gigabit Ethernet ports, which was odd, as the first one found its driver with no trouble at all.

Our software woes didn't end with the driver installation either. We installed Asus's overclocking utility, and had a few headaches with it. Much of the time, it would detect a completely wrong CPU and FSB frequency. In addition, it had to reboot for every change, which makes us question what the point is of doing it via a software utility instead of the BIOS if you're going to have to reboot all the time anyway. We also ran into one scenario where it didn't detect the FSB speed at all, and when we tried making changes in the utility and rebooted, it had set the bus to 400MHz and kept failing to POST until we used the reset jumper. Overall, the entire experience was a bit confusing and seemed to be rather frivolous. The interface was your typical 'We're going to completely violate Windows conventions with things that make sense only to us' design, and was really just there to be brushed aside once we found where the advanced (read actually useful) options were. Things like 'automatic overclocking' options tend to consider 10% a maximum overclock, which is downright laughable to anyone who takes their hardware seriously.

The BIOS itself was not free from issues either. We found

VITAL INFO

Pros

- Good overclocking results
- Many features

Cons

- Some BIOS issues
- Software utility is horrible

Supplier

Corex [011] 238-2315

Internet

www.corex.co.za

RRP

R1,800

Reviewer

Toby Hudon

SPECS

Platform

Intel Pentium 4/Core 2 LGA775 Socket

FSB

533/800/1,067

Memory bus

Dual-channel DDR2
533/667/800/889/1,067

Slots

2 x PCI-E 16x, 1 x PCI-E 1x, 3 x PCI

Ports

USB 2.0 (4+4), IEEE 1394a (1+1), SPDIF, Dual Gigabit Ethernet, parallel, serial, eSATA 1 x ATA133, 8 x SATA

Ethernet

Dual Gigabit + Wi-Fi 802.11g

Audio

ADI 8ch High Definition CODEC

settings in the software utility, such as 2.200V for the DRAM voltage, which weren't available in the BIOS. We suspect there's some kind of mislabelling of some of the settings in the BIOS itself. We also hoped for some more information such as what the current voltages of the RAM and chipset were, and what the projected frequency was going to be after restart, instead of having to figure out what divider 'DDR 533/667/800/889/1,067' uses and manually multiplying the FSB speed. The presence of 889MHz and 1,067MHz memory speed options were quite welcome though. However, another issue we ran into is that while almost every setting uses the normal press Enter and select from list method of changing, the CPU multiplier and FSB speed use +/- keys to adjust, something we didn't find mentioned in the BIOS and had to go to the manual for.

Minor annoyances aside, we got some decent performance out of this board. The chipset maxed out around a 366MHz FSB at stock settings, and adding voltage only got us to 375MHz. Pretty good, though not as impressive as some of the 400MHz+ results we've seen on certain other 965 boards. The 1,067MHz setting for RAM worked quite well with the Corsair XMS2-8500 we installed. When we went for CPU overclocking, we got the most impressive results. Previously our Core 2 Duo X6800 Extreme Edition would struggle above 3.4GHz or so. We had no problems getting to 3.5GHz with stock voltages on this board. With a little extra push to 1.6V, we got a bit over 3.7GHz, but then our heatsink couldn't cope. Benchmarks started producing temperatures up to 80°C and thermal throttling kicked in reducing our scores. Considering we were still sitting with a 340MHz bus at that point, there's a good chance the board and chip could handle a bit more, but we just didn't have the kind of cooling to manage it.

Overall, it's a pretty good board, and if you're looking for a good CPU overclocker, it definitely lives up. Everything works pretty well, despite a few minor interface issues here and there. Nevertheless, it may be worth waiting another couple of months for a BIOS update, and definitely skip the software on the CD. **NAG**



Expect to see the WLAN antenna (top) and stereo mic (bottom) become a regular feature on the Asus mobo range

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FUJITSU SIEMENS AMILO X SERIES

THE MOBILE REVOLUTION HAS already reached its zenith. In fact, in a way, it has been and gone, and almost every business user who needs a mobile PC has one at this point. Even the average person on the street has his or her own personal laptop these days. Yet, for gamers, the desktop is still where we are stuck.

However, it's not that the gaming laptop is entirely a myth. In international markets, custom system builders like Alienware have created monstrous mobile rigs complete with high-end SLI for graphics duties – just about always the weakness of any mobile gaming setup. Nevertheless, not only are these machines insanely expensive, even if you were to import one for your specific hardcore gaming needs, but they're also compromised in terms of sheer bulk, and frequently suffer from the overheated lap syndrome.

Fujitsu Siemens Computers (FSC) is not a brand famous for its high-end gaming offerings, but when the company delivered its new Amilo X series to the NAG office, the spec sheet drew us in. FSC has dubbed the X as 'Xtreme multimedia Xperience', which may be a bit cheesy, but we were pleased to put it to the test.

The CPU powering the Amilo X series is a Core Duo T2500 – a Yonah-core processor clocked at 2GHz. We've tested this CPU on a couple of MoDT (Mobile on Desktop Technology) type of boards in the past, and have always felt that it was promising. The Amilo X is equipped with 1GB of DDR2 RAM, clocked at a disappointing 533MHz, a 17-inch WXGA widescreen LCD, a 100GB SATA hard drive, a dual-layer DVD Writer, a 4-in-1 card reader, four USB 2.0 ports, one FireWire port, Gigabit Ethernet, a 56K modem, and a DVI connector

for connecting to high-quality displays. The chipset holding this package together is the Intel 945P with ICH7 SouthBridge.

Perhaps most importantly to us, the Amilo X has a Mobility version of ATI's X1800 GPU, complete with 256MB of fast GDDR3 RAM supporting it. There's also an Amilo with an NVIDIA 7800 Go.

All of the aforementioned comes in a sleek, slim notebook chassis, which may be slightly larger than the ultra-mobile class and heftier too, but never felt overly compromised as a result. It is substantial yes, but it is a desktop replacement, and yet stops short of being bulky.

We decided to run both 3DMark05 and 06 on the Amilo X to get an idea of how it would handle both the latest titles and slightly older games. For our real world gaming performance test, we installed the excellent *F.E.A.R.*, a title that remains a stern test of modern GPU hardware. For more details on specific components within the Amilo X architecture, we put it through a series of gruelling benchmarks using the latest SiSoft Sandra 2007 SP1 build. All this would tell us exactly how much of a gaming system this mobile pretender really is.

An overall score of 5,756 in 3DMark05, at the default settings of 1,024 x 768, with no AA and no AF, was a decent start. The X1800 handled this last-generation gaming benchmark very well, and even with AA and AF turned up to their maximum (4x and 16x respectively), achieved an excellent 4,943. For a mobile CPU, the dual-core Yonah's 5,700 in this benchmark is excellent, about 50% quicker than Intel's old 3.8GHz single-core 670 desktop part,

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Excellent gaming notebook

■ Cons

- Just upgrading DDR2 would make it even better

■ Supplier

Fujitsu-Siemens [011] 545-2000

■ Internet

www.fujitsu-siemens.co.za

■ RRP

R14,999

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Chipset

Intel 945P

■ CPU

Core Duo T2500

■ RAM

1GB DDR2 @ 533MHz

■ Graphics

ATI Mobility X1800 with 256MB DDR3

■ Display

17-inch WXGA widescreen

■ HDD

100GB SATA with 8MB cache

■ Connectivity

Intel PRO WLAN, Gigabit Ethernet, 56K modem, Bluetooth

■ Additional ports

S-Video, DVI, headphone and mic, 4 x USB 2.0, 1 x FireWire

How they've shoe horned the W-gulping X1800 into this slim a chassis - and kept it cool - is beyond us...



despite a clock speed almost half as fast.

3DMark06 is a much sterner interrogation of the GPU hardware, and the ATI chipset started to show some strain. At default, 1,280 x 1,024 (for which we had to plug in an external CRT, as the EXGA screen is only capable of 1,440 X 900) with no AA and no AF, the Amilo X series managed 3,294. A Pentium 965 XE at 3.73GHz per core and with an X1800 XT manages around 4,600 in this bench, so 3,300 is not disappointing for a mobile rig. The score only fell to 2,945 with AF and AA filtering turned on.

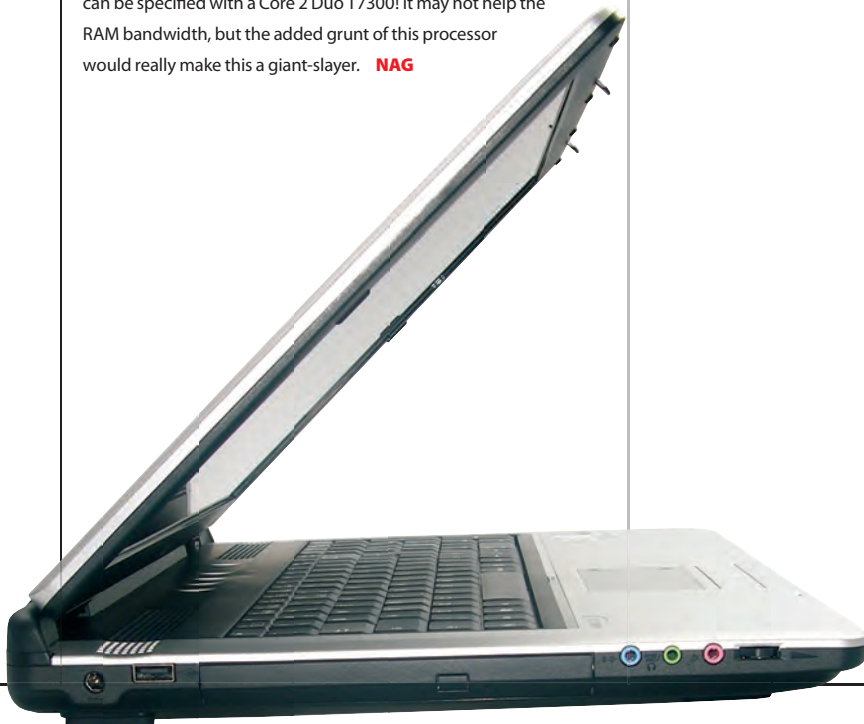
The Amilo X series can't quite keep up with the equivalent desktop GPU as it is clocked down slightly in an effort to manage the thermals. This Mobility GPU runs a core of 500MHz, with its RAM locked at 800MHz effective (400MHz x 2), but it's still good enough to look promising after the demanding Futuremark synthetic benchmarks.

F.E.A.R. with all details maxed out will make any high-end single-GPU desktop puff and wheeze, but this FSC managed to post a minimum framerate of 21fps and an average of 41fps. Simply disabling the AA and turning off soft shadows made the game perfectly playable, with a low of 27fps and an average of 55fps.

It came down to SiSoft though to really show us what the Amilo X series needed to move from being a very good gaming machine, to a mobile gaming monster: RAM bandwidth. DDR2 at 533MHz was never a very good idea – more of a starting point from which the frequency and performance rapidly ramped up. With a RAM bandwidth of just 3,974MB/s, barely any quicker than regular DDR, but with much higher latencies, the Amilo can be sluggish during loading periods in *F.E.A.R.*, and naturally there's nothing you can do in the BIOS to boost this performance manually. The Yonah CPU is fine, managing scores equivalent to a desktop AMD Athlon X2 4000+ or Intel Pentium D 3.2GHz - it's only the RAM holding it back.

This is not to say we were not impressed with the Amilo X series. We loved the design and packaging, were impressed with the CPU and GPU performance, and enjoyed small touches like the integrated card-reader. Moreover, if you must have a mobile machine, but would like to avoid giving up gaming altogether, the Amilo X series is definitely worth a look. We just think that with some fast DDR2 installed, the results would have been even more impressive.

Oh, and if the T2500 isn't enough CPU for you, the Amilo X series can be specified with a Core 2 Duo T7300! It may not help the RAM bandwidth, but the added grunt of this processor would really make this a giant-slayer. **NAG**



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PALIT 7600 GT

W E ALL KNOW THAT the 7950 GX2 is the card to 'want' if you're a hardcore gamer, and countless reviews of 7900 GTXs have left us with little doubt about the potential of this NVIDIA single-GPU card. While slightly further down the cost scale, the 7900 GT has been proven a more than worthy mid-range offering at an attractive price point, and has rapidly become firmly established as the card of choice for those wanting the most from their purchase.

That said, however, R3,500 is still a fair wad of cash. So what do you do if your budget can't stretch even this far? Thankfully there is a 7-series card with all the SM 3.0 goodness you need for modern titles to look and play their best, and it sports a price tag to tempt you in this lower end of the budget scale. The 7600 GT is not a card whose praises have been very highly sung to date, primarily because of the glory and wondrous benchmark results on offer from the top echelon, but for the discerning buyer there are bargains to be had!

The Palit 7600 GT on test here is brand-new to the SA market. Palit cards are now being brought in by a new concern, 100% focussed on the enthusiast market, called PC123 (www.pc123.co.za), which is apparently tired of the high mark-ups on high-end hardware in particular, and has decided to take a stand. That's why the company has started with these Palit units, importing them and then selling directly to consumers, therefore passing cost-savings down to you, the gamer.

By adopting this model, PC123 is able to offer this mid-range card to the SA consumer at the incredible price of just R1,799. One of the factors contributing to the lack of accolades for the 7600 GT, locally at least, has been the price/performance ratio, but when they come in at sub-R2,000, it changes quite dramatically.

The packaging the Palit card arrived in was fairly unimpressive – just a small brown cardboard box in fact. No flashy rendered cartoon characters or oversized box here.

And yet, it's not like you're left short-changed either. Inside the box is the 7600 GT itself, the AV cable you'll need for sending the output to a TV screen, a driver CD, a ubiquitous PowerDVD disc, and a full DVD copy of *TOCA Race Driver 3*. Although *TOCA Race Driver 3*

isn't our favourite game, it makes a change from *King Kong* (Asus) or *Painkiller* (everyone else), and is a worthy addition to your collection and to the Palit bundle.

The GPU has been shrunk to the same 90nm die size as the 7900 GT and GTX. This manufacturing process did great things for the performance of NVIDIA's latest parts, and in the 7600 GT, the new core is mated to a 128-bit memory bus, 12 pixel pipes, and perhaps most crucially, standard clock speeds of 575MHz for the core and 1.4GHz (effective) for the 256MB integrated RAM. Unlocking higher clock speeds has been the key to the success of the 90nm parts. However, how does it work on this Palit example?

Well, we were pleasantly surprised to see the results. In 3DMark06, at standard settings, the 7600 GT pulled 3,354 on an AMD Athlon X2 5000+ system with 1GB of Corsair DDR2 running at 800MHz. The identical system with an older 7800 GTX installed managed 1,000 points more exactly. Pushing the resolution up to 1,600 x 1,200 saw this score drop to 2,780, but this is still an excellent result for a card cheaper than R2,000.

In *F.E.A.R.* the Palit was completely happy at 1,024 x 768, with all setting on maximum, but no AA and no soft shadows enabled. It managed a minimum framerate of 38fps and achieved a maximum of 179fps. Even with both of these performance-sapping features enabled, this 7600 still just scraped above a 25fps minimum framerate!

The Palit 7600 GT is an excellent budget graphics card then. For just R3,600, the price of an average 7900 GT, you could run two of these in SLI mode and probably get performance figures very similar to the five-grand plus 7900 GTX. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros

- Superb performance
- RD3 in bundle
- Attractive price

Cons

- None at all. The Palit represents great value for money!

Supplier

PC123 www.pc123.co.za

Internet

www.palit.com.tw

RRP

R1,799

Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

Core Chipset

G73

Interface

PCI-E X16

GPU clock

575MHz

RAM type and speed

256MB GDDR3 at 700MHz (1.4GHz effective)

Pixel pipelines

12

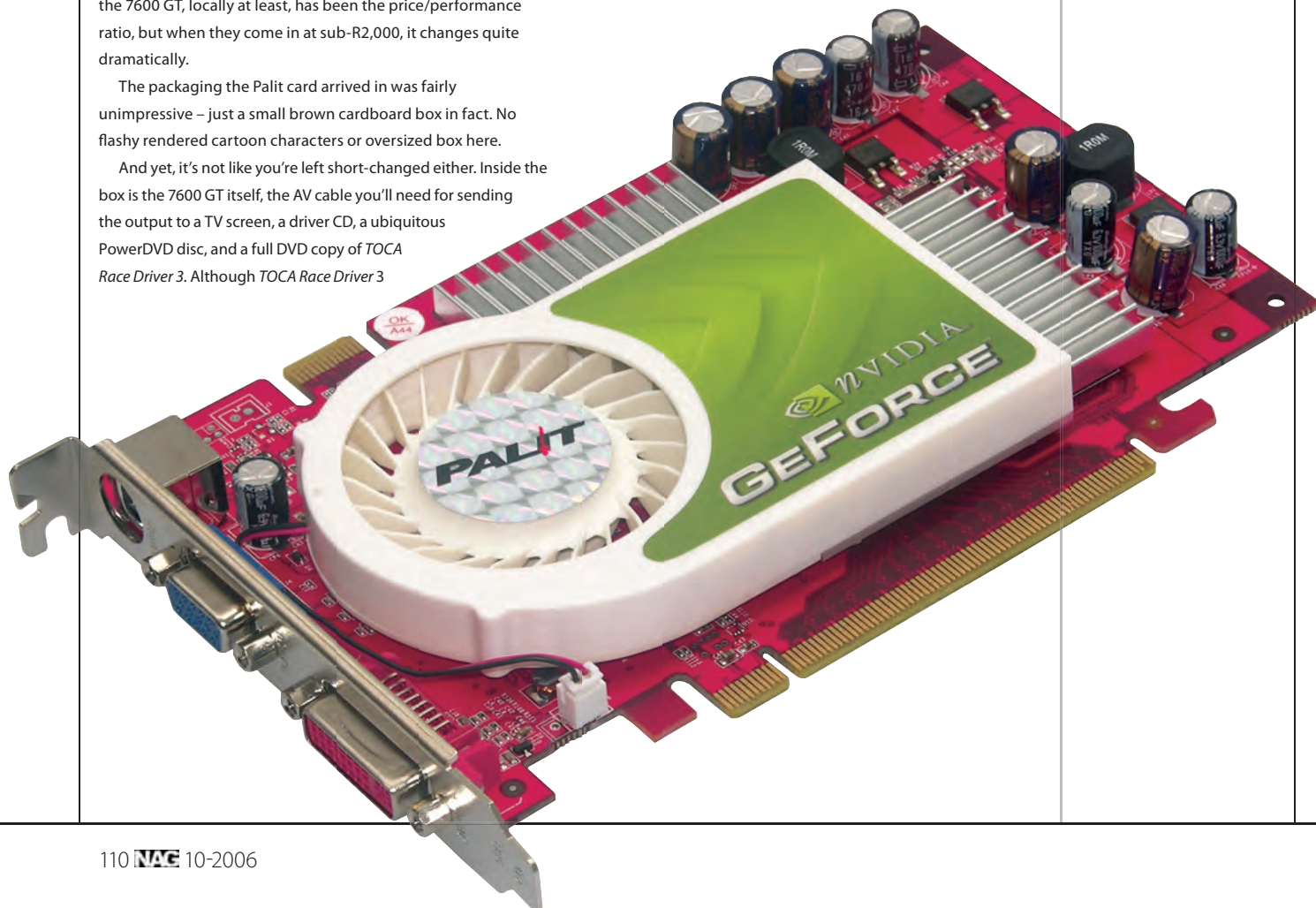
RAM interface

128-bit

RAM bandwidth

24GB/s

The Palit cards look eerily like Gainward models of similar specifications - just with Palit branding stuck on





ADATA VITESTA EXTREME EDITION PC8000

ADATA IS A COMPANY probably better known for its removable storage media, but if you're a fan of performance PC hardware, you'll no doubt also know of the Vitesta Extreme Edition DIMM modules from the same manufacturer.

In this case, we received 1GB of the latest Vitesta-branded DDR2 parts for performance testing – a pair of 512MB sticks each rated at a monstrous PC8000 or 1,000MHz if you prefer, but either way, it should mean a lot of memory bandwidth.

The almost wine-red heatspreaders don't look quite as menacing as the black shrouds on the Corsair XMS range, but the chips beneath were superb. Our Asus M2N32 WS PRO AM2 motherboard recognised the pair at 760MHz by default, but getting Extreme Edition modules means you won't want to run them at this mediocre speed. An additional 0.3V had the RAM clocked up to almost 1,000MHz and the system remained stable.

At this clock, the system was delivering around 8,700MB/s over its memory bus. An astounding number for sure, and a good 1,700MB/s faster than DDR2 at 800MHz can muster. At this speed, timings had to be set to the SPD-suggested 5-5-5-15, so the latency was at 87ns. However, with such a wide pipe, a high latency becomes less of an issue, and the system was noticeably quicker overall in the GUI as well as in games, thanks to the speedy AData DIMMs.

We would have been impressed if it stopped there, but the Vitesta modules had more to offer. Finally, these DIMMs topped out at 1,052MHz on this board, at a clock of 263MHz and a multiplier of 4x, but at the same timings. Scorching along like this, the AData modules endowed the machine with a massive 9,200MB/s of RAM bandwidth!

Although the system was stable at this clock, and able to complete a few benchmark runs, the machine did tend to reboot after extended gaming sessions. Probing the red heatspreaders with the fingers revealed that the modules were generating a lot of heat at 1,052MHz, which is to be expected. At 1,020MHz, the machine was rock solid.

Nonetheless, that's an impressive frequency for RAM modules, particularly ones only rated at 1,000MHz. If you're looking for memory capable of pushing data down the bus at the absolutely fastest possible speeds, these are among the best we've ever seen – beaten for sheer grunt only by Corsair's crazy PC8500 sticks! **NAG**

DDR2 RAM that doesn't stop
- even beyond its MHz rating!

VITAL INFO

- **Pros**
 - Massive performance potential
- **Cons**
 - Generates a lot of heat when pushed
- **Supplier**
Corex [011] 238-2315
- **Internet**
www.adata.com.tw
- **RRP**
R2,380 (per 1GB DIMM)
- **Reviewer**
Russell Bennett

SPECS

- **RAM type**
DDR2
- **Package**
240-pin
- **Rating**
PC8000 (1,000MHz)
- **Timings**
5-5-5-15

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TRUST 5.1 SURROUND USB HEADSET

WITH RAGE DUE ABOUT this time and this issue hitting stands, many people may be looking for LAN party equipment. One of the things most often left behind is headphones. Since most LANs ban speakers, pitching up at a huge gaming event without any sound can be a big letdown.

Fortunately, headphones have become pretty advanced in recent years. This latest model from Trust claims proper 5.1 surround sound using multiple speakers in each earpiece, and support for EAX 2.0, DirectSound3D, DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Pro Logic II, and Dolby Stereo. This is good news for those who insist on having 5.1 sound for their games, but are forced to leave their speakers behind.

At first glance, this headset may seem a bit bulky, and one might expect it to be very heavy. However, it's actually quite light, certainly lighter than most headsets this size. The headband is also wide and well padded, so we didn't find it uncomfortable to wear for several hours. It also includes a flexible microphone, which can swing up and completely out of the way for when it's not in use or you need to down another Mountain Dew quickly before the next map loads.

Another nice feature is the volume control and mute buttons on a small box in the middle of the cable. This can be handy as it's not always easy to get to software volume settings in the middle of a game. It also has controls for the intensity of the subwoofer, which we found to be noticeable, but not massive in terms of the difference it made.

These headphones connect via USB, which can be both good and bad. On one hand, it's good because the digital connection eliminates most of the bus noise problems that can cause buzzing and humming in most PCs. On the other hand, if you're short of USB ports it could be difficult to find a spot to plug it in. However, besides laptops, this likely isn't much of a problem for most modern machines. We had no problems just plugging it in and having it detected without any need for drivers under Windows XP. Our sound was automatically transferred to the new device, so we didn't have to go fiddling to select which sound output to use. When we unplugged it, Windows remembered to change back to the standard audio device with no problem. About the only issue we ran into is that when first plugged into the port, the headphones would sometimes emit a loud pop that was somewhat annoying.

The sound quality was pretty good. We tested several games and MP3s of all kinds. It's a bit short of professional grade headphones, but not too bad overall - definitely, a cut above most of the generic headsets we've seen so far. The surround effect worked as advertised, though we found sounds targeted at the rear speakers were a bit farther away than sounds targeted at the front speakers when we turned around. There was a minor issue with crackling on certain sounds like the *Quake III* armour pickup sound, but we couldn't get it to consistently repeat. It might be specific to being in one of the

specific positional speakers.

For the price, what you get is a pretty good deal. If you're really fussy about your audio quality, you could probably get a pair of high grade Sennheisers with better audio response. However, if you consider having 5.1 sound and a microphone is important, you're unlikely find anything better at this price point. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Pros

- True 5.1 sound
- Microphone
- USB Connection

Cons

- Big, intermittent crackling problem

Supplier

Workgroup [011] 645-6194

Internet

www.trust.com

RRP

R686

Reviewer

Toby Hudon

SPECS

Audio drivers

True 5.1 surround sound with six audio drivers built into headphones

Input

Integrated microphone

Standards

Supports EAX 2.0, DirectSound 3D, compatible with DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Stereo, and Dolby Pro Logic II

Extras

In-line controller with volume, mute switch, subwoofer boost control

Interface

Connects to PC through USB, no sound card required
Connects to PC through USB, no sound card required



These Trust headphones are lighter than they look, especially considering their 5.1 surround sound capabilities and the integrated USB sound-card

ITGEAR PMP MP4 PLAYER

WITH THE IDE INTERFACE being phased out rapidly, we're all likely to have a couple of HDDs using the old standard lying around doing nothing. Perfectly serviceable capacity and it'll just go completely to waste...

Not necessarily. Pop one of these older drives into this groovy ITGear piece of kit, and just like that, it becomes incredibly useful again. Not only useful, but also pretty darned cool!

This ITGear unit is a multitude of devices in one. Sure, it provides USB 2.0 access to the installed drive for the sake of data mobility, but you'll notice a few other connectors at the rear of the silver casing as well. There's an AV connector, coaxial jack and a VGA D-sub.

Therefore, what you do is copy media files of a variety of formats, including MP3s, DivXs, XviDs, JPEGs or even VOBs, onto the drive. However, first you'll need to make sure it's formatted as FAT32, which brings up some limitations on larger drives in terms of partition size, and while the user manual suggests that 32GB is the maximum partition, we found that partitioning our 120GB drive into two 60GB ones worked fine.

Then you unplug the unit from your USB port, move into the living room, and connect it to your TV using the supplied AV cables. Fire the device up, and you're presented with a very industrial-looking, but nonetheless perfectly functional menu for navigating the drive. The unit will scan for the formats it supports on boot, and then present you with a list grouped by file format of what you can view.

We found that the majority of our DivX and XviD movies worked fine. VOBs were no problem and neither were MP3s or still JPEGs. There were one or two videos using slightly odd encodings that refused to play outright, and since the unit is not upgradeable, we had to convert these into the 'right' DivX flavour to use them with the player.

What's more, the ITGear is solidly built with a silver casing made entirely of aluminium, and the proprietary OS written into its firmware might not be very flashy, but was very stable during our testing. You navigate the unit using the included remote control, which incorporates all the media playback functionality you might need.

We can't think of a better use for an old IDE drive than this ITGear Media Bank/HDD player. In addition, the ease of operation impressed us no end. We had no glitches apart from an HDD that was originally formatted as NTFS, and the manual for this unit is written in such shockingly poor Japanese English that it's a hoot all by itself! **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Pros

- Includes absolutely everything you need in the box. There's even a mini screwdriver in there!

Cons

- HDD must be FAT32

Supplier

www.itgear.co.za [041] 373-8884

Internet

www.itgear.co.za

RRP

R699

Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

Material

Aluminium

Dimensions

190mm x 110mm x 35mm

Weight

693g without HDD

Connections

USB 2.0, VGA, AV, Coax

Media supported

MPEG-4, DVD, JPEG, DivX, XviD, MP3



Take this small box, one old and otherwise useless IDE HDD, and voila! Instant, mobile media player!

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AMD AND DDR2 TOGETHER AT LAST

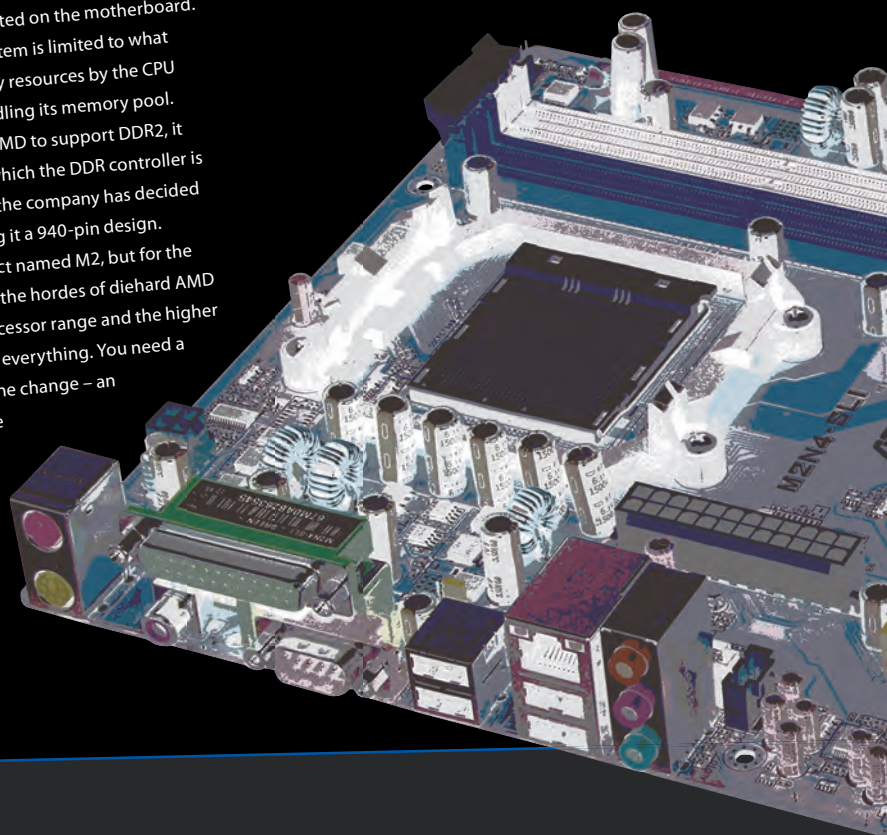
AMD'S DDR2-BASED LAUNCH PARTY MAY HAVE HAD ITS PARADE RAINED ON SOMEWHAT BY THE MIGHTY CONROE ARCHITECTURE AND ITS CORE 2 DUO RANGE OF CPUS FROM INTEL, BUT THE MOVE TO THE AM2 PLATFORM NONETHELESS MARKS A MILESTONE FOR THE MANUFACTURER. YES, AFTER DECIDING THAT THE ORIGINAL DDR2 DIMMS AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC, WHEN INTEL FIRST LAUNCHED DDR2-CAPABLE PLATFORMS, DIDN'T OFFER SIGNIFICANT PERFORMANCE GAINS AND COST FAR TOO MUCH FOR WHAT THEY DID, AMD HAS DECIDED THAT THE TIME IS NOW FINALLY RIGHT TO MIGRATE TO THE NEWER STANDARD.

AS WE ALL KNOW, AMD has had the memory throughput advantage for some time already thanks to one critical thing: the memory controller is integrated onto the die of the CPU itself, rather than implemented on the motherboard. Therefore, while the RAM bandwidth of an Intel system is limited to what the Front Side Bus (FSB) can provide, direct access to memory resources by the CPU means that the AMD architecture is far more efficient in handling its memory pool.

The downside of this arrangement was that in order for AMD to support DDR2, it needed to refresh its processor range with newer CPUs, in which the DDR controller is ditched in favour of the DDR2 MCH instead. In the process, the company has decided to add a single pin to the underside of the new CPU, making it a 940-pin design.

Hence the birth of a new socket for AMD systems – in fact named M2, but for the most part known in the industry as AM2. This move leaves the hordes of diehard AMD fans in a bit of a conundrum. To upgrade to the newer processor range and the higher bandwidth of DDR2, gamers need to replace pretty much everything. You need a new motherboard, new DIMMs, and a new CPU to make the change – an expensive collection of components, particularly if you're looking at the higher end of the price spectrum!

Fortunately, this kind of technology confusion is precisely what we here at NAG thrive on! It gives us an opportunity to do a group test such as this one, round up all the brand-new contenders, and provide you with our detailed findings. So, if you're in the market for a new AMD system but aren't certain what platform you need to run it on, this month's H@rdcor3 roundup will be your new best friend!



HOW WE TESTED

FORTUNATELY, AMD WAS READY and eager to provide us with the hardware we would need to get the most from this collection of boards. Unfortunately, the brand-new 5200+ CPU had not touched down on SA shores yet, but the company generously provided us with a 5000+, and as an added treat, some Corsair XMS2 rated at a mammoth PC8500 (that's 1,066MHz!) so that we could extract the most from the AM2 rigs on test.

Speaking of which, our test platform also included a Legend 7800 GTX 256MB PCI-Express graphics card, 160 GB WD Caviar HDD with 8MB cache, and a 600W Seasonic PSU. All the motherboards tested used the same collection of components to isolate the performance of the platform, and we installed a clean copy of Windows XP SP2 onto each system in turn, with ForceWare 91.31 for the GPU and the platform drivers that shipped with the specific boards.

Our benchmark runs consisted of Futuremark's 3DMark06 synthetic benchmark at standard resolution and quality settings, which means 1,280 x 1,024 with no AA and no AF. SiSoft has just released its latest version of the excellent Sandra testing suite, SiSoft Sandra Professional 2007 SP1, which turned out to be just the ticket for gaining more detailed insight into the performance of specific aspects of each board.

No platform benchmarks would be complete without a real world test. The excellent *F.E.A.R.* has been our real world standard for some time already, but its 1,000fps cap has called into question its continued viability as a dependable benchmark. Fortunately, only Core 2 Duo CPUs can actually breach this framerate at our standard platform settings, and we never ran into any peculiarities with *F.E.A.R.* on these AM2 machines during the course of this roundup. With that out of the way, let's get to the contenders!

ASUS M2N32 SLI DELUXE

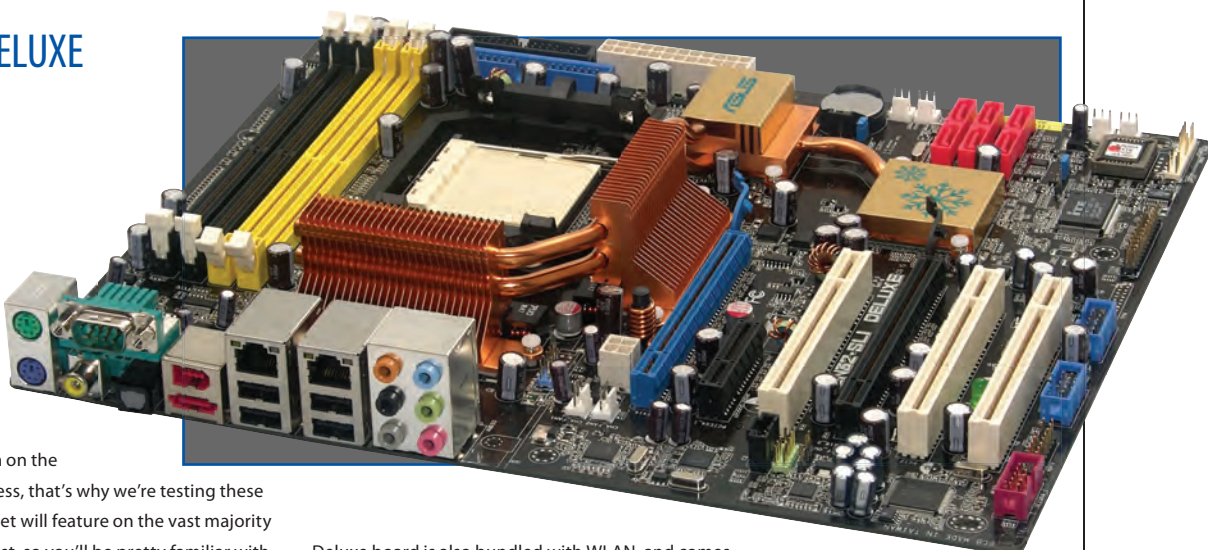
MANUFACTURER: www.asus.com

SUPPLIER: Axiz (011) 237-7000

PRICE: R2,295

THIS DELUXE MOTHERBOARD FROM Asus represents its top of the line AM2 offering. It features the NVIDIA nForce 590 SLI chipset, the chipset AM2 launched with, and the same chipset that is widely regarded as the highest-performing AM2 platform on the market at the moment. Nevertheless, that's why we're testing these nine boards, isn't it? The 590 chipset will feature on the vast majority of the high-end offerings in this test, so you'll be pretty familiar with it by the end of this roundup. However, motherboard manufacturers have clever ways of doing their own designs in a very specific fashion to promote better performance, so even though the chipsets are the same, the outright performance may not be identical.

This Asus board features a passive cooling system over the NB (Northbridge), SB (Southbridge) and VRMs (Voltage Regulation Modules) surrounding the new CPU socket. These passive heatsinks are connected to each other via a snaking heatpipe configuration to aid chipset cooling. As for connectivity, the board sports two PEG slots for SLI, six SATA ports and one PATA channel. On the rear I/O panel there are four USB 2.0 ports, an extra e-SATA port (with one more on the board itself), and two Gigabit Ethernet ports. This



Deluxe board is also bundled with WLAN, and comes with a plug-in antenna for radio networking – the only board featuring this in this group.

In the benches, the Asus performed decently. The CPU component of 3DMark06 gave it 1,924 points, smack-on with what we would expect of an X2 5000+ processor. In the real world, this translates into a minimum framerate of 82fps with a maximum of 351fps in the *F.E.A.R.* tests. SiSoft Sandra showed that the M2N32 SLI Deluxe was, by default, making good use of the monster Corsair DIMMs, automatically clocking the modules to 800MHz for a RAM bandwidth of 6,902MB/s, while the CPU results indicate that the 5000+ performed at precisely the anticipated level, with 18,654 Dhrystone MIPS and 16,009 Whetstone MFLOPS.

ASUS M2N32 WS PRO

MANUFACTURER: www.asus.com

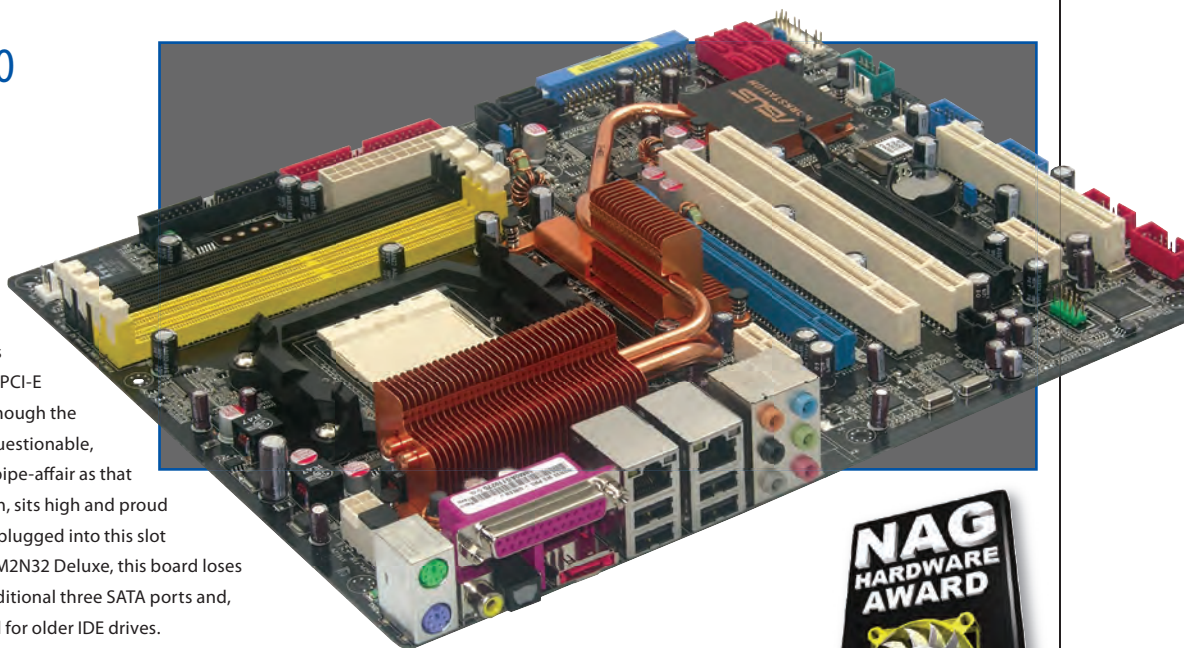
SUPPLIER: Corex (011) 238-2315

PRICE: R2,950

THE FACT THAT THIS is a workstation board is given away by the inclusion of two PCI-X bus slots nestled between the pair of PEG slots on this SLI platform. You still get two PCI-E 1X and one conventional PCI slot, although the location of the secondary 1X slot is questionable, as the NB heatsink, an identical heatpipe-affair as that on the Deluxe version of this platform, sits high and proud and right where a normal-sized card plugged into this slot would need to go! Compared to the M2N32 Deluxe, this board loses the integrated Wi-Fi, but gains an additional three SATA ports and, interestingly, one more PATA channel for older IDE drives.

Other than that, the two boards appear identical. Moreover, the same nForce 590 chipset ought to endow the systems with identical performance. The first run of 3DMark06 set exactly this tone. The WS was in fact slightly behind the competition from the same stable with a CPU score of 1,917. Sandra showed near-identical scores.

However, that's not all there is to say about this board. Surprisingly, this workstation-orientated board turned out to be the best overclocker of the test bar none! And with the 5000+ clocked up to 2.86GHz from its standard 2.6GHz, and that RAM similarly boosted to around 950MHz, the 3DMark score shot up to 2,111, and the Sandra



arithmetic figure climbed to 20,317 MIPS.

This result was unexpected, even to the Asus people. Nothing on the WS PRO suggests notable differences between it and the SLI Deluxe, yet the WS could POST at a monstrous 350MHz CPU clock! Enough said, really.

What is encouraging is that if the WS PRO can do this, the SLI Deluxe and Crosshair boards from the company ought to be able to match it with minor design modifications.



ASUS ROG CROSSHAIR

MANUFACTURER: www.asus.com

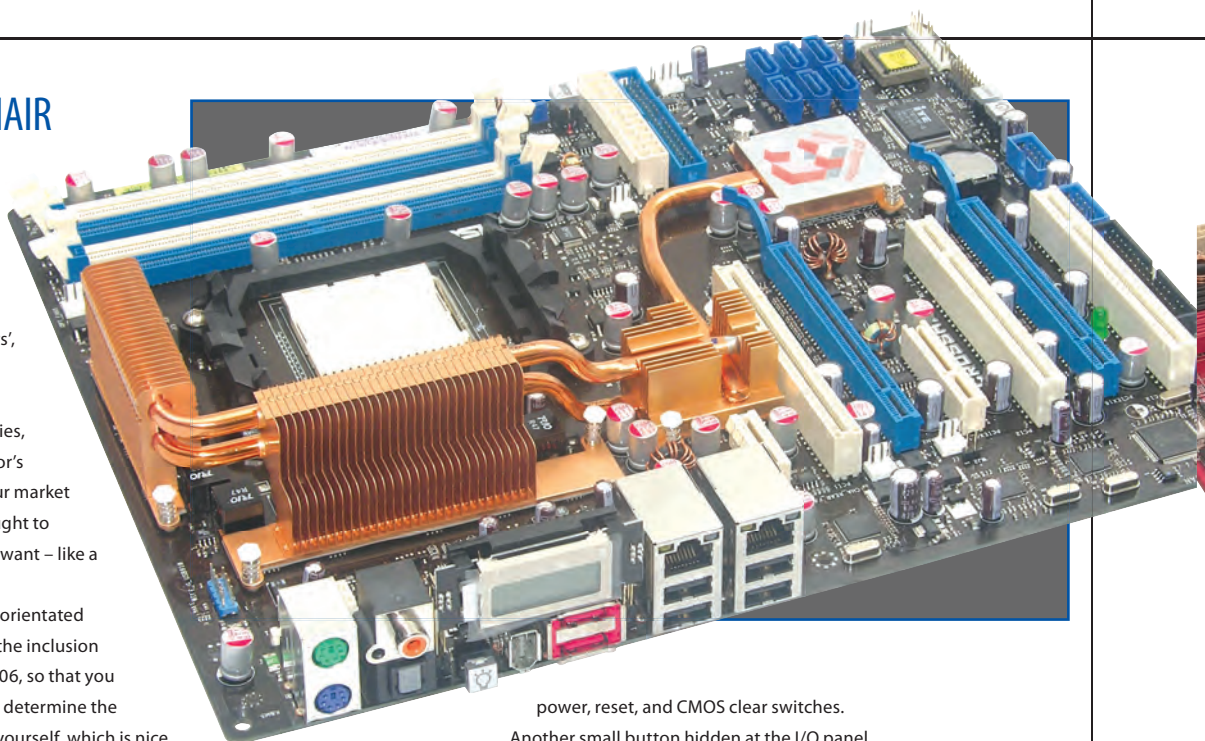
SUPPLIER: Axix (011) 237-7000

PRICE: R2,895

THE 'ROG' IN THIS board's name stands for 'Republic of Gamers', and it is the first in an all-new product line being launched by Asus. Naturally, as the name implies, these ROG goodies are this vendor's efforts to address the needs of our market specifically, and as such, really ought to incorporate niceties that gamers want – like a touch more power, for instance.

The ROG comes with a gamer-orientated software package, which means the inclusion of a full, licensed copy of 3DMark06, so that you can run your own benchmarks to determine the performance of your new rig for yourself, which is nice. It also includes a SupremeFX DTS-certified 8-channel audio solution via a riser slot, and a stereo microphone (which picks up audio exceptionally well from anywhere in the room). On the I/O panel, rather than the old school parallel and serial ports we're used to seeing, there's an LCD that displays BIOS errors and POST codes for easier BIOS tweaking.

Sadly, you'll only see the LCD if you're sitting behind your case. However, there is some more bling here, in the form of several LEDs lighting up the locations of very useful additions like the integrated



power, reset, and CMOS clear switches.

Another small button hidden at the I/O panel will light up more soft blue LEDs, pointing the user to useful things like SATA ports and DIMM sockets.

It all looks incredibly funky. The performance, however, was almost the same as the M2N32 SLI Deluxe, and the board doesn't OC as far as its WS PRO counterpart does. Still, it is in first-generation and a good stab at the market with some very cool bundled extras, but it could use a round of refining to tweak the focus of the actual hardware slightly. In the real world *F.E.A.R.* test, it actually lagged behind very, very marginally to its own 590-based Asus siblings.

ASUS M2NPV-MX

MANUFACTURER: www.asus.com

SUPPLIER: Axix (011) 237-7000

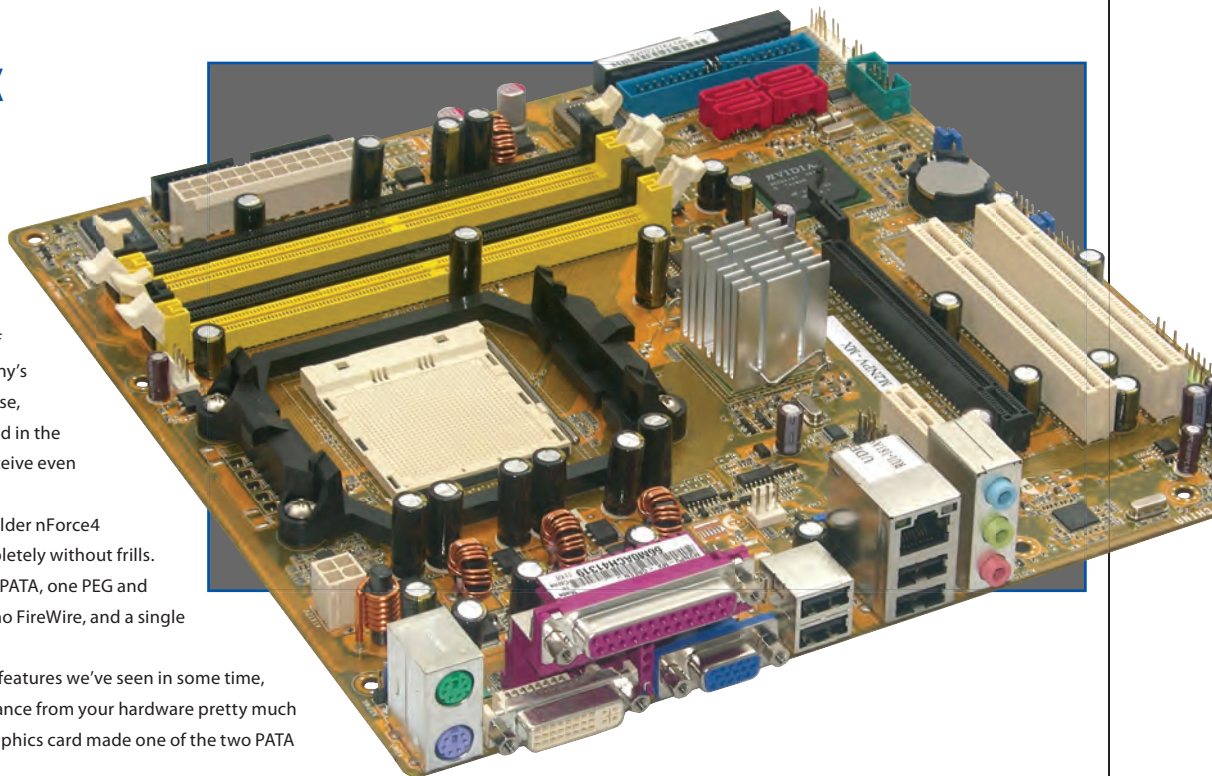
PRICE: R750

AS YOU CAN NO doubt see, Asus provided us with by far the most extensive range of AM2 boards. This is the company's entry-level AM2, and we promise, the last Asus MOBO we included in the roundup – although we did receive even more!

The M2NPV is based on an older nForce4 chipset, and is just about completely without frills. There are four SATA ports, two PATA, one PEG and two PCI. It includes no eSATA, no FireWire, and a single Ethernet port.

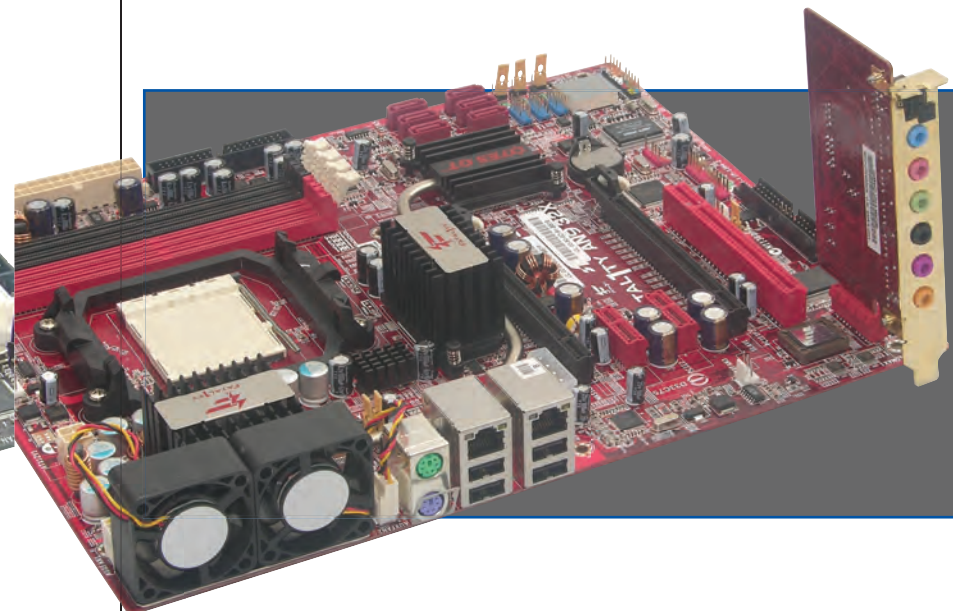
It also boasts the least BIOS features we've seen in some time, making getting more performance from your hardware pretty much impossible. In addition, the graphics card made one of the two PATA channels totally unusable!

However, in outright, stock performance, it matched the 590 boards at every turn. In 3DMark06, 1,928 for the CPU was perfectly in range, and in *F.E.A.R.* it actually managed higher framerates than its pricier siblings, albeit a difference of mere units. Still, a minimum framerate of 88fps and a maximum of 365fps were among the best in



the entire test, for a stock setup.

Therefore, it's clear that a cost-effective entry into AM2 ownership is viable using the older nForce chipset, but we must say we'd rather get hold of something a bit more fully featured.



ABIT FATAL1TY AN9-32X

MANUFACTURER: www.abit.com.tw

SUPPLIER: Frontosa (011) 466-0038

PRICE: Not available locally

THE FATALITY TIE-UP in the naming of this latest ABIT offering is, naturally, meant to suggest that you'd play better if you based your gaming rig on this hardware, as it has been co-designed by the world's most famous gamer for ABIT customers.

Moreover, if the branding isn't enough, there's always the plethora of red LEDs, which light the board up like a Christmas tree when you turn it on to impress your friends. In addition, it physically looks good – a red PCB with black 'detailing' in the form of the expansion slots and passive cooling system for the chipsets. It's a bit strange to use passive components and then add a pair of 40mm fans to the I/O panel. Thankfully, these aren't intrusively noisy, but they are noticeable when you've gotten more used to the sound of silently cooled boards.

That said, the ABIT is well laid out overall, although an SLI setup would mean the loss of both PCIE 1X slots, leaving just one PCI slot and the riser slot for the 8-channel HD audio solution. All six SATA slots and the lone PATA slot are easily accessible regardless of installed hardware.

In 3DMark, it managed the best CPU score we've seen so far, 1,958. SiSoft Sandra 07 highlighted a possible reason for this increase. Although using the same clock speed for our Corsair modules as on every other board tested, the Fatal1ty managed to get the most from the RAM at these stock speeds, with the benchmark showing memory bandwidth of 7,109MB/s.

This advantage didn't show in F.E.A.R. however. The ABIT Fatal1ty recorded figures firmly in the centre of our spectrum obtained during this roundup.

The ABIT, however, would prove to be our best stock performer of the lot. Which actually makes it rather sad that the local ABIT suppliers Frontosa won't be officially bringing this platform to SA shores...



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Drivers:

- Satellites:2 x 1.5" Full-range drivers +2 x 1"
- High-range drivers
- Subwoofer:2" woofer

Speaker dimensions:

- Satellites:(H)19.0 x (L) 100 x (W)40 (mm)
- Subwoofer:(H)26.0 x (L)120 x (W) 60 (mm)



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MSI K9N SLI PLATINUM

MANUFACTURER: www.msi.com.tw

SUPPLIER: Pinnacle (011) 265-3000

PRICE: R1,499

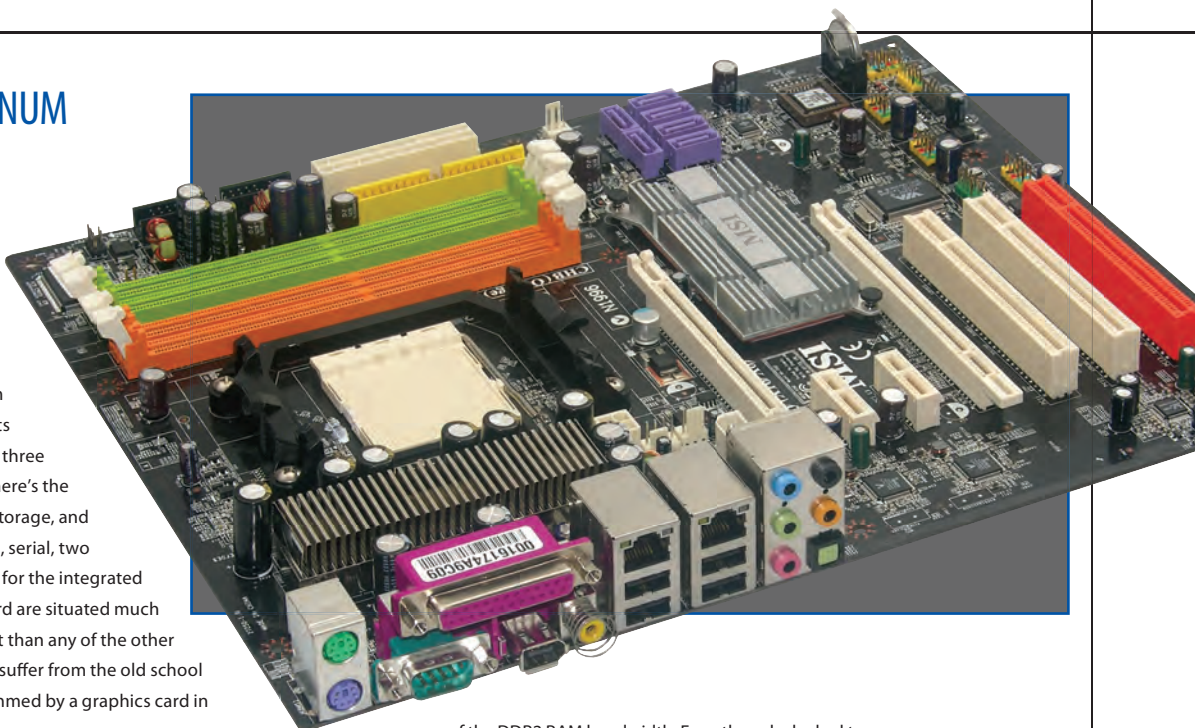
ANOTHER NFORCE 590-BASED SLI board, the MSI started off making a strong case for itself through a smart layout. Although you would lose both PCI-E 1X slots in SLI, you would still be left with three PCI slots for your add-in cards. There's the standard six SATA, one PATA for storage, and a full I/O panel, including parallel, serial, two Gigabit Ethernet ports, and jacks for the integrated audio. The RAM slots on this board are situated much further away from the CPU socket than any of the other AM2 boards in this roundup, but suffer from the old school problem of the catches being jammed by a graphics card in the PEG slot.

The feel-good overall design, however, shatters to pieces when you try to plug in the auxiliary EPS12V connector. Every time you plug-in this necessary connector, you'll hit your fingers on the caps around the CPU socket itself, which will break sooner or later.

Benchmark figures for the K9N were less than ideal. Although the 3DMark06 CPU score of 1,928 was in the lower range of our roundup, the *F.E.A.R.* results were among the best, with a minimum framerate of 90fps and a maximum of 378fps! What's very curious about this outcome is that, according to Sandra '07, the MSI made the worst use

of the DDR2 RAM bandwidth. Even though clocked to 800MHz like all the others, this board could only communicate with the PC8500 DIMMs at 5,108MB/s, which is shocking.

The BIOS includes all the OC functionality you might need, arranged under a subsection labelled 'Core', which relates to MSI's proprietary CoreCell OC engine. The CPU frequency goes all the way up to 425MHz, although we found this to be insanely optimistic, as the passively cooled heatsinks would get dangerously hot with even a mild OC applied – hot enough to wreck the stability of the system in fact.



ECS NFORCE4M-A

MANUFACTURER: www.ecs.com.tw

SUPPLIER: Asbis (011) 848-7000

PRICE: R530

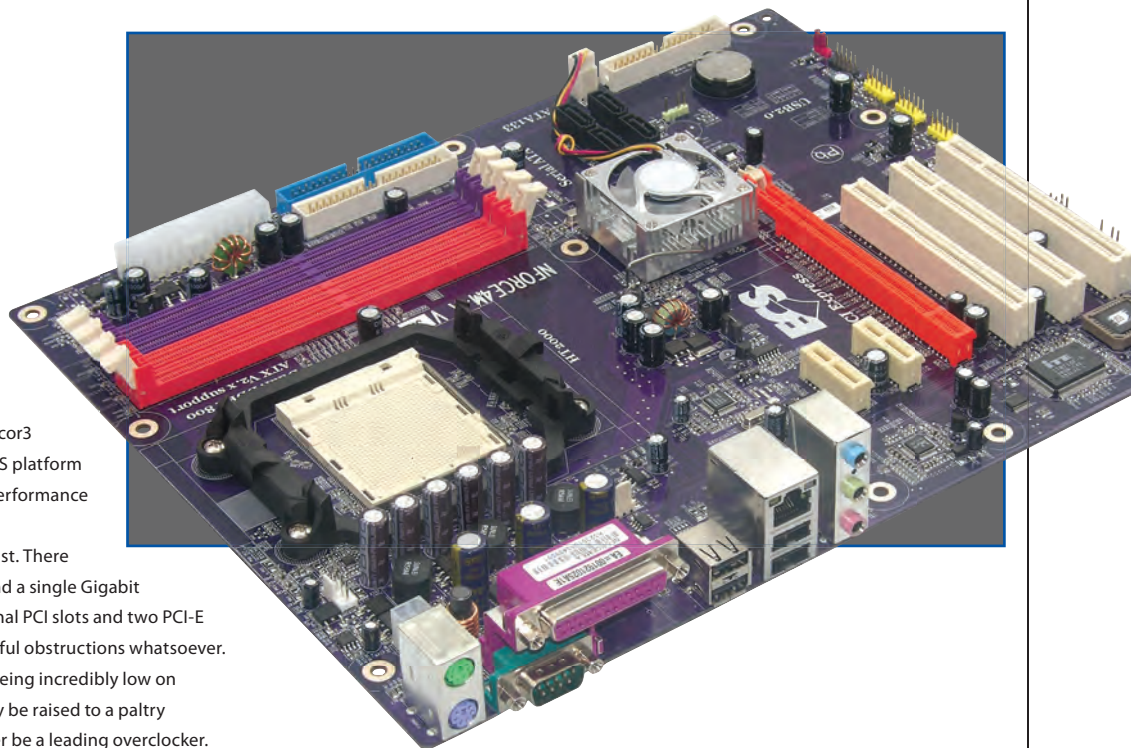
ANOTHER BUDGET-ORIENTED OFFERING USING the older nForce4 chipset, this ECS distinguishes itself by being the cheapest possible way to build an AM2 system by far. What we found strange about the board was that when AMD heard we were doing an AM2 H@rdcor3 roundup, it was very keen to get us an ECS platform as it claimed to have seen "... excellent performance results on AM2 using this platform."

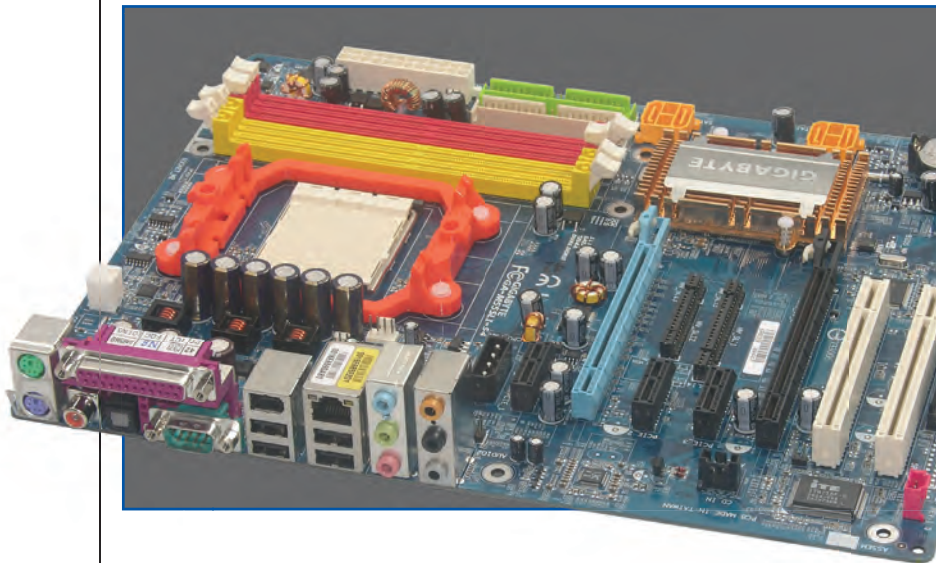
The features list is sparse to say the least. There are only four SATA slots, one PATA slot, and a single Gigabit Ethernet port. There are three conventional PCI slots and two PCI-E 1X slots, all well laid out and with no painful obstructions whatsoever. The BIOS betrays the low cost however, being incredibly low on tweaking options. The CPU clock can only be raised to a paltry 300MHz for instance, so the ECS will never be a leading overclocker.

At stock speeds, however, the NFORCE4M-A managed to match our leading 590-equipped board in the 3DMark CPU test with 1,958. The memory bandwidth measured by SiSoft of 7,001MB/s is also among the best. However, in *F.E.A.R.*, these advantages seemed to evaporate, and the ECS posted dead average results of 80fps

minimum and 338fps maximum.

Frankly, we've no idea why the big fuss over this board. Its most exceptional features are its low price, not its outright performance, and it is better than the Asus nForce4-based 'budget' offering.





GIGABYTE M55SLI-S4

MANUFACTURER: www.giga-byte.com

SUPPLIER: Rectron (011) 203-1000

PRICE: R1,695

WE RECEIVED BOTH AN S3 and S4 version of the new AM2 platforms available from Gigabyte, and were hard-pressed to spot any spec differences on the respective packaging. Only when we unpacked the physical hardware could we see that the S4 has two PEG slots for SLI, and the S3 only one. Otherwise, both are identical, using nForce4 micro architecture to deliver a well-rounded AM2 platform at attractive price points.

The board is well laid out. It features only four SATA slots, but two PATA channels, and although you do lose two PCI-E 1X slots in SLI mode, you're still left with one of these slots and two conventional PCI slots.

However, the BIOS is not the totally stripped-down version that comes with the other 'affordable' boards. It may not be a LANParty, but the traditional 'Ctrl-F1' BIOS keystroke unlocks more than enough options to get a solid, stable OC working. The CPU core can be adjusted all the way up to 455MHz!

It wasn't stable anywhere near these speeds however, but the OC process is totally simplified. If your chosen settings fail as you inch your way up the MHz ladder, the BIOS will report that the OC has failed and automatically clock the CPU down. In fact, it clocked it too far down, running our 5000+ as a 1.55GHz processor at one stage. It is simple overclocking and done fairly well, but ultimately not a particularly effective one.

Sadly, though, the Gigabyte turned out to be the worst performing board at stock frequencies in our roundup. Strangely, RAM bandwidth was the second highest, with the S4 managing 7,034MB/s, but both 3DMark and F.E.A.R. results lost a few points to every other board here, at 1,917 and 78fps min and 343fps max respectively.

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BIOSTAR T-FORCE 590 SLI DELUXE

MANUFACTURER: www.biostar.com.tw

SUPPLIER: Sonic Informed [011] 805-3800

PRICE: R1,999

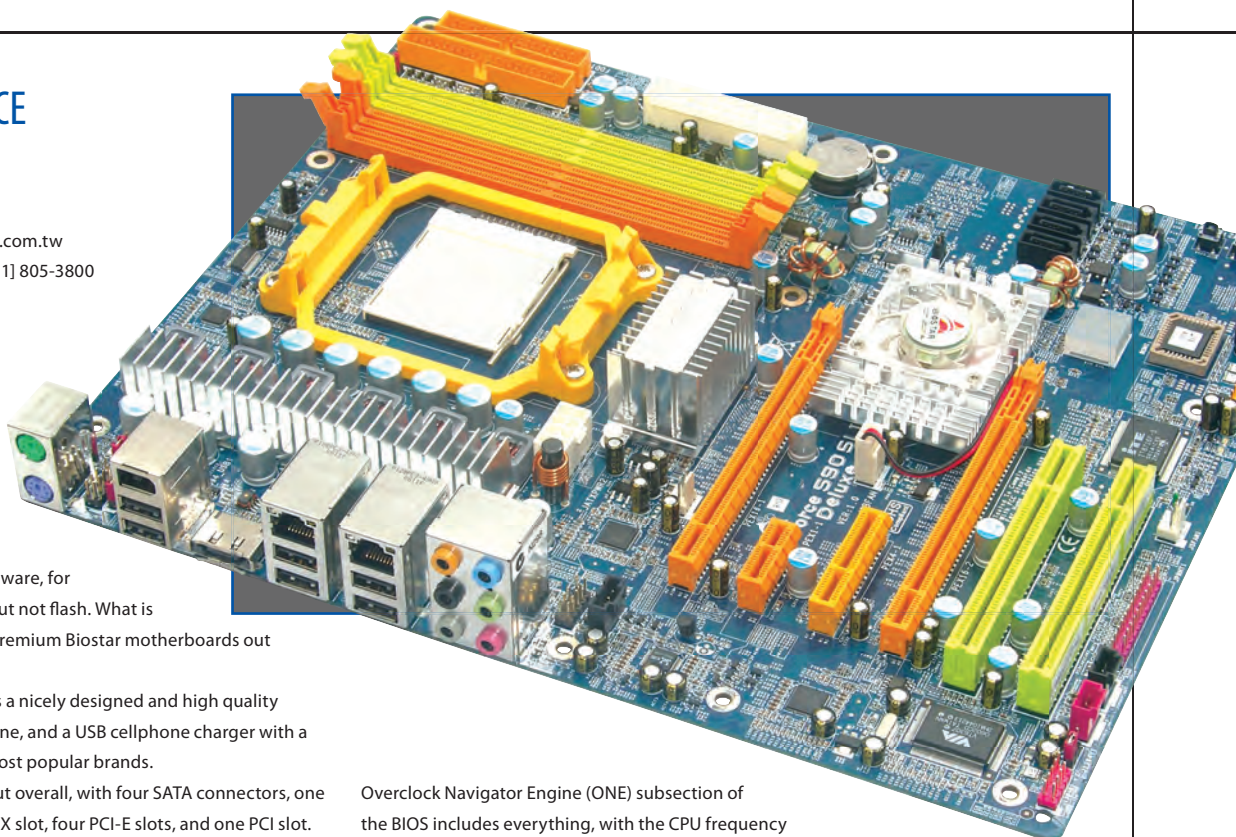
BIOSTAR IS WOOLING THE enthusiast and gaming market strongly at the moment, but using an interesting model. The packaging may be funky, but is relatively reserved, the hardware, for the most part, competent but not flash. What is really cool about all of the premium Biostar motherboards out there today is the bundle.

In the Biostar box, there's a nicely designed and high quality USB headset with microphone, and a USB cellphone charger with a multitude of adapters for most popular brands.

The T-Force is well laid out overall, with four SATA connectors, one PATA connector, one PCI-E 1X slot, four PCI-E slots, and one PCI slot. The SATA shortage is made up for by including an eSATA port, two additional USB 2.0 ports and a FireWire connector, but you would lose both PCI-E slots in SLI.

Biostar has also made one unforgivable error in layout. With a stock AM2 reference CPU cooler installed, the DIMM socket closest to the CPU is only marginally useable! To get a DIMM module installed will take some painstaking angling of the chip as you slide it into each retainer slot on either end.

The T-Force BIOS is well up to the task of overclocking. The Biostar



Overclock Navigator Engine (ONE) subsection of the BIOS includes everything, with the CPU frequency adjustable up to a totally crazy 500MHz maximum in 2MHz increments! It's an amazingly simple OC procedure as well, although it didn't stretch as far as the Asus WD PRO board with any degree of stability.

It was consistently strong across all of the benchmarks however. The T-Force was passing memory through the RAM subsystem at 6,981MB/s, managed a minimum *F.E.A.R.* framerate of 86fps and a maximum of 356fps, and managed a leading 1,942 CPU score in 3DMark06.

AM2 OVERCLOCKING

OVERCLOCKING MAY STILL NOT exactly be mainstream, but there are many gamers out there who chase the best performance in their games of choice through some manual tweaking. Overclocking capability is always an excellent indication of the underlying capabilities of any motherboard, and is often the differentiator between more budget-orientated platforms and premium products. However, the results of our AM2 OC testing were undeniably surprising.

Where older nForce chipsets could do a core clock of 320MHz, and current Conroe platforms have been running as high as 400MHz, the overall performance of the AM2 on both 590 and nForce4 chipsets wasn't particularly impressive. Many

struggled to hit 250MHz and still POST, others fell away at 270MHz, and only one managed over 300MHz.

The Asus M2N32 WS PRO posted and ran Windows stably at 350 x 8 – an overall clock speed increase of a mere 200MHz to 2.8GHz (the same as the FX-62 at stock speeds). Nevertheless, the performance boost was significant, with 3DMark06 posting 2,111 for the CPU, helped largely by the upped memory bandwidth of running the DDR2 closer to 1,000MHz – an impressive 8,706MB/s.

The Biostar managed 2.86GHz stably, but at only 260MHz core clock and a multiplier of 11x. At this speed, it matched the results of the WS PRO clocked at 2.8GHz.

AND THE WINNER IS...!

FOR THE MOST PART, the variations in performance among all of these contenders was so marginal that calling an overall favourite isn't as cut and dried as it usually is. Moreover, this similarity is not merely due to the majority of the entrants being based on the same nForce 590 chipset. In fact, we saw a larger performance delta on the 590 chipset than we did with any of the more budget-orientated platforms.

If you're looking for some ways to save on your upgrade to the new socket, and are willing to skimp slightly on your platform, the cheaper nForce4-based solutions all offer similar specifications. The Asus M2NPV-MX is too diluted for our tastes though, even for a cheapie. The ECS scores well in the value for money category thanks to its low price tag, but in our opinion manages to best marry the right combinations of price, functionality and performance for a smart mid-range buy. It has SLI, a decent BIOS, and more OC potential if matched with the right parts. It may have returned the worst F.E.A.R. numbers at stock speeds, but some mild tweaking should resolve this well enough. In 3D Mark 06 the ECS matched the fastest on test.

The larger pack of 590 boards included some interesting wildcards. Dominated by Asus, thanks to this company's sheer breadth of products available and speed at getting new platforms to the market, these boards were also predictably among the most controversial.

We really wanted the ROG board to do well. Bundling 3DMark06 is a nice touch for the gaming market, and that stereo microphone would be very useful for trouble-free VoIP in-game communications. The M2N32 SLI Deluxe would be ideal if you needed WLAN but didn't want to buy a PCI WLAN NIC, but otherwise failed to really stand out.

MSI's K9N Platinum is a solid, dependable AM2 board. It is murdered, however, by its poor RAM performance, and the absolutely ludicrous positioning of the auxiliary 12V connector! Sort out this major niggle and the underlying technology can't be faulted.

ABIT's Fatal1ty AN9 is clearly the extrovert of the bunch. All those LEDs have become synonymous with Wendell-branded products, so why not light the motherboard up in a similar hue? The AN9 was also our best performer overall at stock frequencies, and a passable overclocker, although the OC options are strangely organised in the BIOS. The only real downside to this board is the minor humming of those two 40mm fans on the I/O panel.

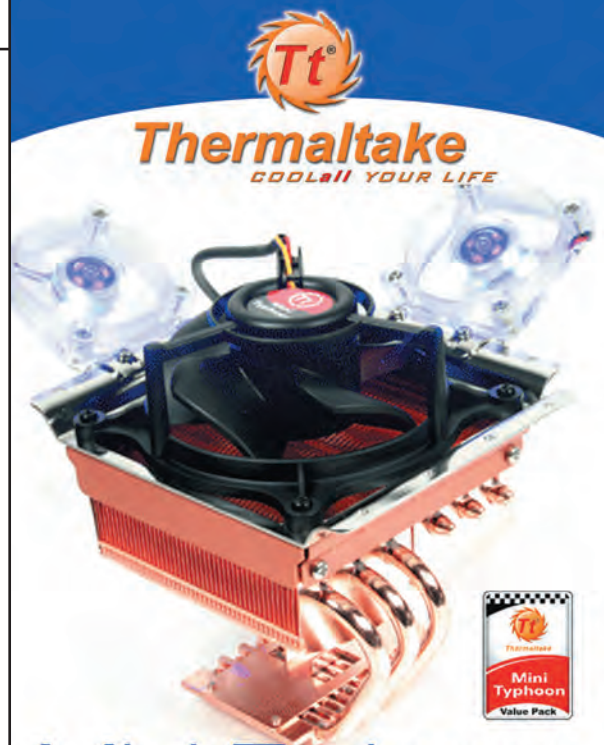
If you've been paying attention, you'll already know that it only leaves the unlikely Asus M2N32 WS PRO and the relatively unknown Biostar T-Force. Both are based on the nForce 590, the WS has PCI-X slots, as well as substantially more options for connecting a large number of HDDs, and the Biostar features a layout that makes installation of the topmost DIMM a bit nerve-wracking.

Although both overlocked the 5000+ CPU similarly, they did it very differently, and the 350MHz CPU clock achievable on the Asus unit was by far the most impressive we've seen from AM2 yet.

In the end, the bundle tipped the scale enough for the Biostar to sneak in as our choice of AM2 board. Thankfully, the hardware itself includes abilities sufficiently well rounded to stay among the leaders in every one of our comparative performance tests, and the thoughtful inclusion of those useful little niceties is enough for us to declare it our overall winner of this NAG AM2 H@rdcor3 roundup. **NAG**

FINAL BENCHMARK RESULTS TABLE

Board	3DMark06 CPU score
ECS NFORCE4M-A	1,954
ABIT Fatal1ty KN9-32X	1,954
Biostar T-Force 590 SLI	1,942
Asus ROG Crosshair	1,933
Asus M2N32 SLI Deluxe	1,932
MSI K9N SLI Platinum	1,928
Asus M2NPV-MX	1,926
Asus M2N32 WS PRO	1,917
Gigabyte M55SLI-S4	1,917



Mini Typhoon Value Pack

Special reversed fan reduces the noise from air-rebounding and create better air flow for heat dissipation

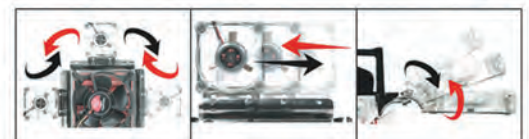
3 Applications in 1 LGA775, K8, AM2

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- 6 heatpipes and all copper structure provides best performance.
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Internet: www.microsoft.com/hardware

RRP: R629

AT A PRESS CONFERENCE held at the Games Convention in Leipzig in August, Microsoft unveiled one of its new gaming weapons. Microsoft's return to the gaming mouse arena comes in collaboration with another gaming heavyweight peripheral manufacturer, Razer. The result? Behold the Microsoft Habu Gaming Mouse. Now, we're not quite sold on the name yet, and only time will tell how lithely 'Habu' will roll off the tongue in gaming circles, but it certainly looks the business on paper. Ultimately, though, it is how it performs that will determine its real status with the hardcore gaming fraternity.

The mechanics:

- 2,000dpi laser engine, powered by Razer Precision, delivers super-fast response times (the Habu's data path was opened from eight to 16-bits);
- Always-On Mode pioneered by Razer results in virtually no latency;
- Seven programmable buttons with Hyperresponse allow you to program your button functions (Razer's Hyperresponse technology reduces latency);
- On-the-fly DPI allows you to adjust DPI for controlled sensitivity;
- High-speed motion detection gives you speed with movement of up to 45 inches per second and 20G acceleration;
- Onboard profile memory enables you to store up to five game control profiles on the mouse; and
- Razer Synapse 32KB onboard memory.

The looks:

- Zero-acoustic ultra slick Teflon feet for smooth and quiet gliding;
- Ergonomic design features GlowPipe side rails and large, rubber-coated buttons;
- Interchangeable side button panels provide two options for different hand sizes or preferences;
- Thin, flexible wire gives you the speed of a wired mouse with the feel of a wireless device;



- Gold-plated USB connector; and
- A comfortable, user-friendly grip that is slip resistant. **NAG**

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*Product Marketing Manager, Microsoft
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MULTIPLAYER



WCG SOUTH AFRICA CANCELLED

THE WORLD CYBER GAMES brand has had a troubled history in South Africa. The license, which is awarded to regional operators by the international WCG Organising Committee, was first held by the former GLSA (Gamers League of South Africa). After a successful qualifier in 2001, the following year's event was dogged by allegations of unpaid prizes, as well as a controversy surrounding Quake III player Robert "Undead" Lu, who was ultimately not allowed to participate in the grand final event, because, our sources say, of faulty paperwork.

With the dissolution of the GLSA, the licence was then taken over by Arena 77, who ran a problem-free event in 2003. However, in 2004 the misfortune continued, as the licence was instead given to WCG global sponsor, Samsung, and its subcontracted marketing company, Penguin International. Penguin's lack of knowledge of the scene resulted in a qualifier that looked very professional, but was awkward and random for the players. This eventually caused a rift between the various

people involved in the event, and resulted in the resignation of the original tournament director. Thankfully, Penguin learned from its mistakes in 2005 and allowed the Arena 77 administrators more freedom to run the tournaments correctly. Aside from several intense arguments between the gamers, and a few replayed Counter-Strike matches, the tournaments went ahead smoothly.

For some reason, evenly numbered years seem to carry the WCG curse. This year, the license once again changed hands, as another marketing company, Core Impact, outbid Penguin for the right to host the local qualifiers. After receiving the go-ahead from South Korea, it launched the Website www.wcg2006.co.za and began a publicity campaign, which included the advertisements in previous issues of this magazine. Arena 77 was approached by Core Impact to facilitate the tournaments, and it in turn established partnerships with ZAPS and NakedIT in Johannesburg and Carnage LAN in Cape Town,



to run the regional preliminaries. The finals were scheduled to take place at rAge 2006 alongside the other Arena 77 competitions.

However, according to a short press release from Core Impact, the 2006 WCG South Africa qualifier has been cancelled due to lack of suitable sponsorship. The costs involved in running the event, especially in sending a team overseas, run into hundreds of thousands of rands. "Certainly our hope was to be able to stage World Cyber Games South Africa 2006," reads the press release. "However, due to the time constraints we faced, we did not receive the sponsorship support to stage these local competitions."

The cancellation of the WCG South Africa



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qualifier has come as a shock to the local gaming community. Despite the various problems over the years, players have always looked forward to competing for a place in the world finals. Former GLSA director, national team captain and player, Warren "Storm" Steven, issued a strongly worded statement. "Planning and executing WCG events in SA have never been easy," he said, "but if you get paid to run these events, you had better fulfil your promises. Core Impact has lost the confidence of the players and halted the momentum of growth of competitive gaming in South Africa. To announce

an event without a sponsor is just plain impractical. It's a simple principle of business and event management."

Len Nery released an apology to the gamers on behalf of Arena 77, but made it clear that he and his staff were only contracted by Core Impact to manage the event, and were not responsible for the cancellation. "I knew that Arena 77 would bear the brunt," he said, "even though we do not own the WCG licence. I am truly embarrassed by this, but there is and was nothing I could do to change it. We were asked by Core Impact to manage the

competition and put plans in place for the qualifiers and registrations. Only when money needed to be paid for the initial expenses did Core Impact state that they could not go through with it."

In the wake of the decision, Arena 77 has increased the number of registration spots in the rAge *Counter-Strike: Source* competition, and awarded auto-berths to the top CS 1.6 teams. The ex-WCG regional preliminaries will also be switched to Source, and the winning teams will receive R1,000 in prize money, as well as free entrance to rAge. www.arena77.com

AND THE AWARD GOES TO...

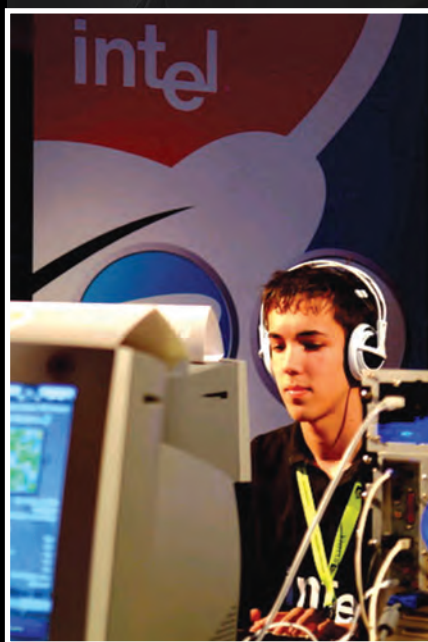
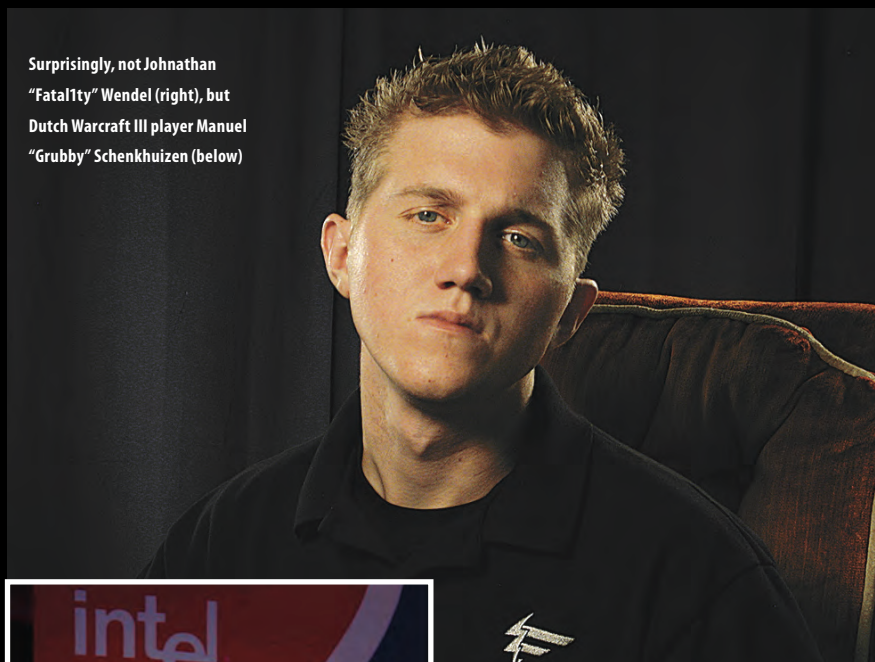
SPEARHEADED BY THE GERMAN-BASED Electronic Sports League (ESL), a group of top industry professionals came together in 2004 to create an annual e-sports awards event. Similar to the Laureus Awards in mainstream sport, or the Academy Awards in cinema, the event aims to honour those professional gamers who have achieved the most in their fields each year. On the last weekend of August this year, the Games Convention, Germany's largest industry trade show, played host to the 2006 E-Sports Awards. Fully produced and televised by the German television station GIGA, the ceremony was a true media extravaganza that attracted worldwide press attention.

Choosing winners in a field as diverse as e-sports was never going to be simple or uncontroversial, but to lessen the subjectivity of the awards, the panel of judges included several of the most well respected personalities in competitive gaming. Renowned journalists Michal "Carmac" Blicharz (of ESReality fame) and Trevor "Midway" Schmidt (strategic brand director of Gotfrag.com), as well as representatives from the Cyberathlete Professional League, the Electronic Sports World Cup, and the World Series of Video Games all sat at the judges' table.

This year, awards were presented in seven categories. E-Sports Player of the Year was won by Dutch WarCraft III star Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen, while Newcomer of the Year was awarded to the German Counter-Striker from Alternate Attax, Navid "Kapio" Javadi. Best Counter-Strike Player was won by Fnatic's Patrik "F0rest" Lindberg (Sweden), and best WarCraft III Player by Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen (the only player to receive two awards). E-Sports Team of the Year was presented to the Dutch-British-Australian multi-gaming organisation Fnatic. The awards for Best Games Publisher and Best E-Sports Coverage were decided not by the judges, but by a public community vote, and were presented to Electronic Arts and SK-Gaming.com respectively.

However, the awards have come under harsh criticism from the community for being Eurocentric, as well as too WarCraft III heavy. Grubby, for instance,

Surprisingly, not Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel (right), but Dutch WarCraft III player Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen (below)



while performing consistently in the WarCraft scene, had not won a major tournament during the 2005-2006 season. Rival nominees for E-Sports Player of the Year, such as Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel (USA),

who won \$150,000 in the CPL World Tour Painkiller finals, and Johan "Toxic" Quick (Sweden), the Roger Federer of professional Quake 4, were thought by many to be more deserving candidates. In the category of Best Counter-Strike Player, Danny "fRod" Montaner, the main fragger behind 2006's most successful Counter-Strike team, Complexity (USA), was also overlooked; a somewhat puzzling decision, considering his statistics for this season were well ahead of any other player's.

Nevertheless, the E-Sports Awards 2006 proved a successful showcase of professional gaming ideals, even if there were still kinks to be worked out. Looking forward to next year's awards, we can expect the addition of several new categories, mainly in the deathmatch genre (which includes games such as Quake 4 and Unreal Tournament 2004), and an even larger ceremony. Unfortunately, these sorts of awards will always be at the mercy of the judges' opinions, but they never fail to inspire debate and discussion, or to raise awareness of the fast-growing sport. www.esports-award.org

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F.E.A.R. COMBAT

ON THIS MONTH'S COVER DVD is a surprise gift from Monolith and Vivendi. Totally free, you only have to go to www.joinfear.com to get your own key to install it. *F.E.A.R. Combat* is the entire multiplayer portion of *F.E.A.R.* including all the patches, original maps and a few new ones. Some new gametypes have been added, such as Control that has you capturing and holding various points around the map.

The multiplayer portion of *F.E.A.R.* is an exhilarating and different experience from the usual fare. In *Combat*, you choose which weapon you wish to start with, and every time you spawn, you'll have that weapon. During a deathmatch, the lighting plays an important part, as often your own shadow can give you away, or you can time a grenade throw to perfection thanks to someone not paying attention to their own shadow. Combat is vicious and brutal, bloody and intimate. The melee moves allow you to scissor-kick, slide, pistol-whip or roundhouse opponents for instant kills. The Team Deathmatch option allows for slower, more tactical play where team-members cover each other and move slowly.

F.E.A.R. Combat can be played with the retail *F.E.A.R.* and vice versa, so you can connect to any server you see online. **NAG**

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MMO ADVICE AND SUGGESTIONS

THINKING OF PLAYING AN MMO? It can be a daunting task if you're looking up all the variety, the payment methods and the people. To help, the NAG staff pooled their collective experience and we've come up with a few helpful suggestions and some advice.

- Don't be any of the types of people who are described on www.flamewarriors.com. Yes, online is a fun virtual playground, but if you're going to be the loud, obnoxious kid in the sandbox, don't be surprised when you can't make any friends except for other loud and obnoxious people;
- Remember that most MMOs have two things in common: they can be incredibly time-consuming and they tend to have monthly subscription fees. If you intend to play an MMO, stick to one or two at the most, otherwise you won't have enough free time to dedicate to your MMO(s), or you'll be stuck paying a monthly fee for something you never play;
- An always-on connection is ideal. ISDN is the best for online gaming in terms of lowest pings, but it works out pricey from a cost perspective. The last thing you want is the court coming after your gaming rig because you stayed connected for a whole month with ISDN.

Always-on solutions may appear costly, but thanks to recent changes in the market, an ADSL connection is not as unfeasible as it once was, especially if you're serious about MMOs;

- An MMO is the type of thing that could easily become a second career, or take over your life. It's best to manage this kind of situation carefully. Some forethought and responsibility can prevent addiction or an intervention from your forgotten and neglected friends;
- Every MMO is different, and often what works in one MMO won't work in another - this includes social elements, political elements or just plain strategies;
- Parents, if your kids are into MMOs, it helps if you try to play the same game. Much like how *Monopoly* was a 'family game', so too can an MMO be something that brings a family together; and
- The most important bit of advice: don't play alone. Most MMOs are designed to work with a group dynamic. Don't be surprised that going it alone yields only your own repeated death. Often, it helps to play an MMO that friends/family are already involved in, or you can try to start playing a specific MMO, getting your friends involved too. **NAG**



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BUILDING A LEVEL EDITOR

ADDING A LEVEL EDITOR TO A PUZZLE GAME IS ALMOST ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA. ALLOWING PLAYERS TO CREATE THEIR OWN LEVELS AND DISTRIBUTE THEM IS AN EXCELLENT WAY TO BUILD A COMMUNITY AROUND YOUR GAME. IF YOU HOST THE BEST PUZZLES ON YOUR SITE AND ENCOURAGE ASPIRING LEVEL BUILDERS WITH COMPETITIONS AND THE LIKE, YOU CAN EASILY INCREASE YOUR PLAYERS' ENJOYMENT WITH A SURPRISINGLY SMALL AMOUNT OF WORK.

CREATING A LEVEL EDITOR in Game Maker is actually a relatively simple exercise, but it does present a few problems that can be confusing at first. We'll be using our own in-house puzzle game, *Golem Master*, as a guinea pig to demonstrate building a level editor, as it's a perfect case for having one (plus, once the graphics we're busy commissioning are done, we'll be wanting readers to submit their own levels and help make the game more fun).

THE LOGIC BEHIND LEVELS:

There's a concept in game development called 'data driven game design'. Essentially, what it boils down to is that with a little bit of extra work, a game can be developed that stores its actual gameplay information in files that it loads, instead of in the actual code. It has proven to be a very successful development method, with most games these days being in some way data-driven. Mainly, it provides two advantages. Firstly, it's much easier to build a sequel or an expansion to the original game. Secondly, keeping your data and your code separate allows game designers (and artists, in some cases) to change the way the game plays without having to spend ages editing tons of special-case code, making the game much more flexible.

This gameplay/data abstraction is the line of thinking that has led game development to the point it's at now, where engines are popularly considered the sum-total of all 'good' game development (as a regular reader of this section, you, of course, know better). However, data-driven design is a very good idea: it's what lets us enjoy all those mods for popular first-person shooters, new maps for strategy games, and so forth. Storing parts of your gameplay in external files does mean that you need systems to create that data (an editor) and to load it into your game again when the player needs it.

Game Maker's Room Editor does store rooms as data, but seeing that we can't actually edit that without opening the game's source code in GM, it isn't true data-abstraction. We're going to have to build our own saving and loading system for *Golem Master* that will allow end-users to make their own levels without having to know all the complicated stuff you do about Game Maker.

SO WHAT DATA DO YOU SAVE?

The first step in designing a level editor for any game is understanding what information you need to save for each level. The bottom-line is that you need to store the minimum amount of info that you're going to need to reconstruct that level as you load the data back into your game. There must be no room for confusion: your game must produce an identical level every time the same information is loaded. (This is similar to the way that networking needs to be deterministic in order to be stable.)

Thankfully, *Golem Master* uses a relatively simple grid as the base for its puzzles. This means that to successfully recreate a level from a file, all we need to do is keep track of which puzzle pieces have been placed where, as well as save the positions of two other special points: the golem's start position and the position of the goal.

Because we're going to be saving our level data in a file, it's important that we specify a format or pattern for this data that we're going to follow while we're saving it. If we don't stick to our formatting rules, the level data is going to be so much garbage when it's time to load it, and we'll be lucky get a level at all, let alone prevent a crash... The first entry in our file is going to be a version number, which will let us know which version of the level editor saved this file. Having a proper versioning system will protect us should some of the objects change later, or if we add new functionality to the level editor. It also means that, if we try to load an older version, we might be able to 'translate' the file format into the format (and version) we'd prefer.

Therefore, the first line is going to be a version number: we'll start at 1. The rest of the data is going to tell GM where to create objects in the room, so we'll store an x position (relative to a reference point), a y position (also relative) and finally the type of the object. That may seem confusing, but each object has a type value - it's this value that GM uses when we use a purple object name in a with command or collision function. You can find out what an object's type is by checking its *object_index* variable. You'll notice when we look at the files later that this is a number and not the object's name. Don't be confused: this is just how GM stores that object type internally. When we type that name in a script and it goes purple, GM converts it to that number.

To close off our format specification, we're going to add the rule that we'll write each value on a single line. That means we'll have three lines for a single object: its x position, y position and type. So, any correctly formatted *Golem Master* level will have $3N + 1$ lines, where N is the number of objects in the puzzle. Because we're the only people who are going to be using these files, we get to decide on the file extension! Unfortunately, .gml (Golem Master Level) is already taken, so we'll go with .gld (Golem master Level Data).

ROOM FOR AN EDITOR

With the specifications out of the way, it's time to get cracking in GM. Load up *Golem_Master_007.gml* (as always, included on this month's cover DVD), create a new room by duplicating the current TestRoom, and call it LevelEditorRoom. We haven't built a game menu yet, so just drag the new room above TestRoom in the list to have it load when the game starts up.

The idea behind the editor is that we're going to let users place



the Tiles and Obstacles that make up a puzzle themselves. Thanks to the state-based way we built the tile selection system (you remember that, right?), we don't need to create special objects to represent 'editor' versions of all the game's objects (which is something a lot of games have to do to prevent the game-logic getting in the way when people are trying to edit something). All we have to do is delete the Selector object that's sitting just above the top left corner of the board, and suddenly all those complicated objects won't do anything when we run the game. Neat, in a roundabout way.

One of the things we need to deal with is the creation of a 'fresh' game board every time someone loads a level. If we write a script to handle that, we can use it to give us a clean board in our editor too. Create a new group in the Scripts section of the game and create a new script we'll call CreateNewBoard. The script will take two parameters: an x and y position for the top left corner of the board, in case we ever feel like changing the layout of *Golem Master* at a later stage. Here's the GML code for the script [see **image 1**]:

Notice the nested for loops and how we change the type of piece being created depending on whether or not it's on the edge. Let's test it out, shall we? Create a new object, call it Board and make it invisible. In its creation event we're going to execute CreateNewBoard with x and y as parameters. Place a Board object in the same position as the top left corner of the game board in LevelEditorRoom, and delete the rest of the objects in the room. We'll be replacing the buttons in a bit anyway... Run the game and marvel at the pristine board – it'll be editable soon enough.

PLACING NEW OBJECTS

ALLOWING THE USER TO place his or her own objects is a simple matter of letting them select which type of object is desired and then creating a new object (snapped to the grid) where he or she clicks on the board. There are many ways we could do this, but the easiest and most flexible is to create a dummy object that looks like a transparent version of the object being placed and appears below the mouse cursor when it's over the board. When the user clicks on the dummy object, we create an object of the specified type at the dummy object's current position. This approach has the added benefit of making selecting the type of object as simple as changing a variable on the dummy object, which makes our editor menu nice and simple!

First, create a new group for Editor objects and create our EditorDummy object in it. EditorDummy will always have a depth of zero so that it's above other objects in the game. At first, we'll want the dummy to create standard Tiles until the player selects something else, so set its *sprite* to tileSpr. To prevent clicks 'missing' later, set its *mask* to tileSpr too. In the *Create* event, we set the value of variable **image_alpha** to 0.5 to make the dummy semi-transparent, and we create the objectType variable that we'll use to store what should be spawned by also using *set the value of a variable*. As mentioned with the sprite, objectType should be set to Tile at first (note, don't place inverted commas around 'Tile', it's not a string!).

Place the following code in EditorDummy's Step event [see **image 2**]:

As the comments say, it repositions the dummy under the mouse cursor, but only if the mouse is above the space being used by the board. The same grid snapping logic is used here as in the TileSelector and FloorSelector objects.

To allow us to create objects, we write some more code (using the *Execute a piece of code* action) in the dummy's Mouse

```
Script Properties
Name: CreateNewBoard

//Creates a new board by spawning GridEdges and Floor objects:
//(x, y)

//We have a 13 by 13 board:
for (col = 0; col < 13; col += 1) {
    for (row = 0; row < 13; row += 1) {
        //We want to create a Floor...
        tileType = Floor;
        //...unless this is an edge of the board...
        if (row == 0) or (row == 12) or (col == 0) or (col == 12) {
            //... then we create a GridEdge instead.
            tileType = GridEdge;
        }
        //Create the actual tile:
        instance_create(argument0 + row * 32, argument1 + col * 32, tileType);
    }
}
```

-> Left pressed event. We only want to create a new object if there isn't already one there, so first we check to be sure the specific object type isn't already below the dummy using "if not instance_position(x, y, objectType) and not instance_position(x, y, Tile)" followed by "instance_create(x, y, objectType);" to create the new object... Place an EditorDummy into LevelEditorRoom (where doesn't really matter because it will automatically move itself around, but placing it next to the Board is ideal) and go crazy covering the board with Tiles!

However, as much fun as that might be, we're lacking the ability to delete things that we've placed. It might seem like GM's *Destroy instances at position* action is perfect for this, but a bit of experimenting with that action should show you why it's not good in this case: it destroys everything there including the Floor/GridEdge and the dummy itself! To get around this limitation, here's another handy trick that can be used in many places in GM: create a specialist object that destroys particular objects it collides with and then deletes itself.

Create a new object in the Editor group and call it Deletor. Give it the same sprite as a Floor, although you can create a custom red X if you want to... In its *Create* event, set *alarm 0* to 1. Place a *destroy the instance* action in the *Alarm 0* event. These two things together will make the object live for only one frame and then destroy itself. Now we need to make it delete the other objects we don't want: add a *Collision* event for Obstacle, place a *destroy the instance* action in it and set the action's target to be other. This will delete anything that inherits from Obstacle that collides with a Deletor. Duplicate this collision event for GolemStart, Goal, Hole, Ooze and Rune to make sure that we can delete all the objects that aren't Floors or GridEdges [see **image 3**].

To make EditorDummy delete objects, simply *Create an instance of object Deletor* at x, y in EditorDummy's Mouse -> Right pressed event.

SELECTING DIFFERENT TYPES OF OBJECT

The power of the dummy approach is only semi-realised at the moment. To take full advantage of it, we need to allow the user to select different types of objects (otherwise, we'd only get very, very boring levels).

Create a new object, and call it ObjectSelector. We'll use this as a parent object for all the clickable selection objects we need to make for each Tile, Obstacle and doohickey we want the user to be able to place. Use ObjectSelector's Mouse -> Left pressed event

Image 1: NewBoard(x,y)



Image 2: EditorDummy.Step

```
Execute a piece of code
Applies To: Self Other Object:

//Position the dummy under the mouse cursor, but only on the board!
if (mouse_x >= Board.x) and (mouse_x <= Board.x + 32 * 13)
and (mouse_y >= Board.y) and (mouse_y <= Board.y + 32 * 13) {
    //Snap to the grid:
    x = mouse_x - mouse_x mod 32;
    y = mouse_y - mouse_y mod 32;
} else {
    //If the mouse isn't over the board, move the dummy off screen:
    x = -1000;
    y = -1000;
}
```

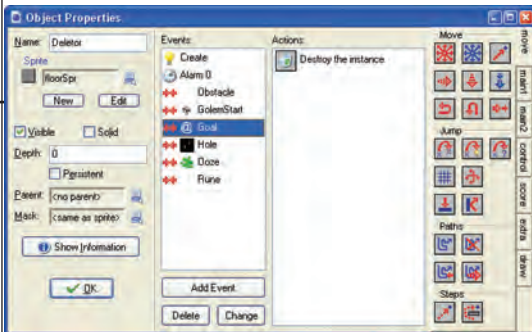



Image 3: The Deletor object

to set EditorDummy.objectType to objectType (which we'll set on each object that inherits from ObjectSelector) and EditorDummy.sprite_index to sprite_index, using either code or the variable actions. Place the following code in ObjectSelector's *Draw* event to give us a useful selection effect [see **image 4**]:

Now all we need to do is to create an object that changes what the EditorDummy creates: make a new object that inherits from ObjectSelector; set its sprite to be the same as the object we want to be able to place; set the value of objectType to the desired object in its Create event. Therefore, SelectTile would use the same sprite as tile and its objectType would be Tile... The same holds true for all the other place-able objects (SelectOoze would use oozeSpr and its objectType = Ooze, etc.), so go ahead and create objects for all the Runes, Walls and Tiles, as well as objects to allow the player to select GolemStart and Goal. The last two are very important! [see **image 5**]

Once you've finished creating all the selection objects (be sure not to have any name confusion with the already existing TileSelector and FloorSelector), place them in LevelEditorRoom and try them out. We've nearly got a fully functional editor. All we need now is... [see **image 6**]

LEVEL SAVING

Before we can save the level, we need a button that users can use to tell us that they want to save... Create a new button in the Buttons group (SaveButton's sprite is included with GolemMaster007.gml on the cover DVD as saveButtonSpr.gif), and load it just as we did for the other buttons previously. In its *Mouse -> Left released* event, be sure to *Call the inherited event* and then execute a piece of code that uses GM's built-in **get_save_filename** function to let the user specify a file [see **image 7**]:

Hopefully, you will have noticed the call to "SaveLevel(save FileName)" in the code for SaveButton. SaveLevel is just one of two scripts that we'll need to create in order to make saving a reality, but before we do that, we need to go over how GM lets you access files.

Game Maker provides a set of functions for reading and writing data in files, like most programming languages. First, you have to open the file in one of three different ways: reading, writing or appending. Reading should be simple enough: it gives you a read-only pointer to the beginning of the file you asked for. Writing creates a new file with the name you've specified (overwriting any file that might already exist with that name) and lets you write from the start of the file. Appending lets you write data onto the end of an already existing file... Obviously, we use write mode and thus call **file_text_open_write** to get a pointer to our file. All the successive GM file handling calls take that pointer as a parameter so that they know which file we're editing.

The first script we need to write is the simpler of the two. Its role is to write the data we want to save for each object to a file; hence, it takes a file pointer and an object as parameters. Here's the SaveObject script [see **image 8**]:

The second, slightly longer script that creates our save file and makes use of SaveObject is called SaveLevel (which is called by

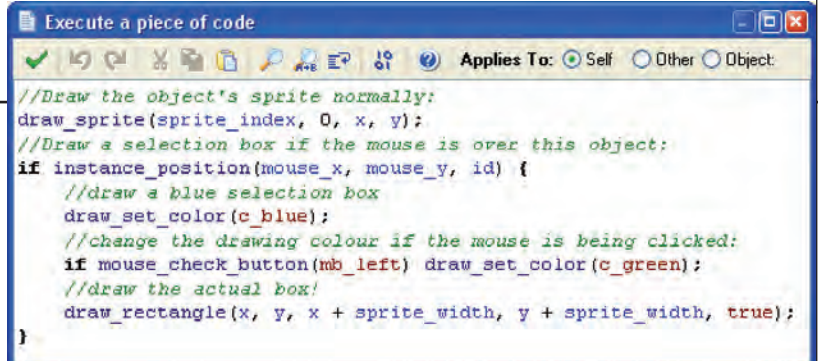


Image 4: ObjectSelector.Draw

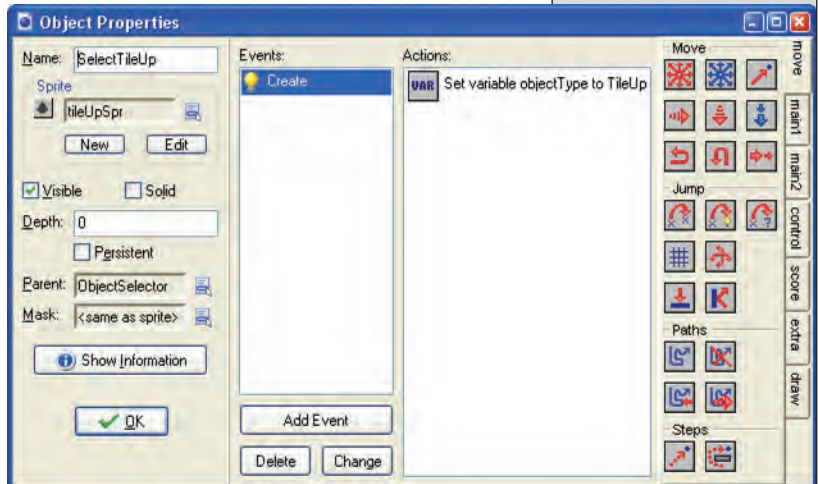


Image 5: see how simple the selection objects are?

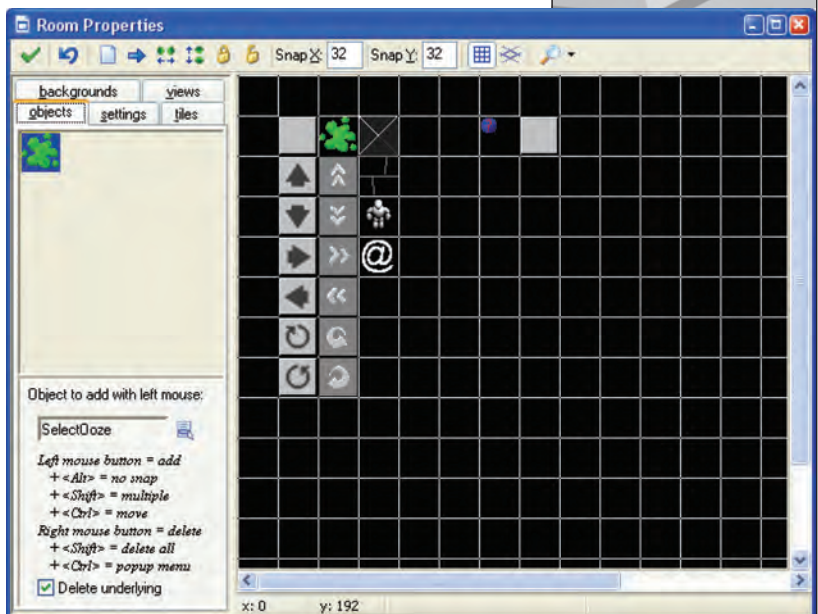
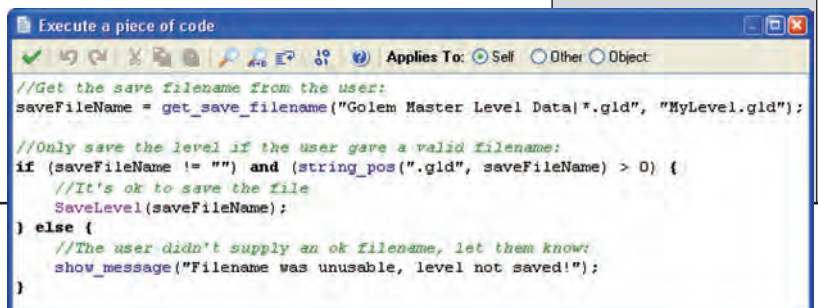


Image 6: the level editor room with selection objects

Image 7: SaveButton. Left_released code





A Gun in a Knife Fight



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the SaveButton, as you'll recall). SaveLevel first opens the file so that we can write to it. Then it writes our version number, which we've decided is v1 for now, followed by all the objects that aren't Floors or GridEdges, on our Board. Thankfully, we don't have to manually go through each object, we can simply use 'with' clauses to pass their

```
<saveLevelScript.jpg : SaveLevel(filename)>
```

That's it: one level saved! Unfortunately, we've used up all our Game.Dev space for this month with this double issue of coding. Loading our levels will have to come later...

USEFUL CONCEPTS IN THIS ARTICLE:

- The concept of data-driven game design;
- Version number included in saved levels to prevent future confusion;
- Dummy object spawns many different types of object easily;
- Self-destroying object to delete specific colliding objects; and
- File access in Game Maker. **NAG**

Script Properties
Name: SaveObject

```
//Saves an individual object to the supplied file:  
//(file, object)  
  
//x position line  
file_text_write_real(argument0, argument1.x - Board.x);  
file_text_writeln(argument0);  
//y position line  
file_text_write_real(argument0, argument1.y - Board.y);  
file_text_writeln(argument0);  
//object type line  
file_text_write_real(argument0, argument1.object_index);  
file_text_writeln(argument0);
```

Script Properties
Name: SaveLevel

```
//Saves Golem Master level data to a file:  
//(filename)  
  
//Create the file so that we can write to it:  
saveFile = file_text_open_write(argument0);  
  
//Write the version number to the file, this is always first!  
file_text_write_real(saveFile, 1);  
file_text_writeln(saveFile);  
  
//Write all the information for all Obstacles: (Tiles, Walls)  
with (Obstacle) {  
    SaveObject(other.saveFile, id);  
}  
  
//Write all the Children of Floor to the file, but exclude Floors:  
with (Floor) {  
    if (object_index != Floor) {  
        //Only save the object if it's isn't a Floor  
        //(ie: Ooze, Hole or Rune)  
        SaveObject(other.saveFile, id);  
    }  
}  
  
//Write the GolemStart to the file:  
with (GolemStart) {  
    SaveObject(other.saveFile, id);  
}  
  
//Write the Goal to the file:  
with (Goal) {  
    SaveObject(other.saveFile, id);  
}  
  
//Close the file so that saving is complete:  
file_text_close(saveFile);
```

Image 9: SaveLevel(filename)

Image 8: eObject(file, object)

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DOOM

IN-A-BOX

PERHAPS DOOM MAY NOT be the first choice one would consider when trying to decide what popular game would make a great board game, but somehow it manages to pull it off. Two to four players play *Doom: The Boardgame*. One player plays a sort of 'dungeon master' that controls the monsters and actually builds the levels as the players move from area to area. The board game comes with a full campaign, which starts with an appropriately titled level, "Knee Deep in the Dead". A booklet explains to the dungeon master player what he/she should say when the players enter certain areas, and shows how the level should be constructed, depending on where the players go. Players who are more inventive can make up their own campaigns.

Players take turns moving their marines around, collecting health, armour and weapons. The dungeon master moves demons on his/her turn, and combat happens whenever an attack is made. The combat manages to retain an almost authentic feel, especially when one marine shoots a rocket at a Cyberdemon, only to kill all his team-mates in the splash damage. Security doors require key codes, which can be found if the players enter specific rooms. Part of what makes the *Doom* board game is its flexibility - the dungeon master player doesn't have to follow the designs in the booklet, and can add or remove demons from rooms as they are being built, depending on his/her judgment. Since the level construction pieces are big and easily assembled (as is required since you build the board as you go along), there is a lot of variation you can add to a level.

The board game is best suited to four players, due to the Skills. Each player can choose or be assigned a Skill such as Sniper or Killer, which gives them specific advantages and abilities that become indispensable later. Teamwork isn't required, but it certainly helps. The average game takes up to an hour or more, depending on how many levels the players wish to play. **NAG**

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SYRIANA

Cast: George Clooney, Matt Damon, Jeffrey Wright
Director: Stephen Gaghan
Genre: Drama/Thriller
Rating: 13LV

SYRIANA IS THE NAME of a fictional oil-rich state that resembles most of the countries in the Middle East. This story, the directorial debut of *Traffic*'s screenwriter, is a dramatised look into the oil business and the facets around oil that cause profits, mergers, espionage and terrorism. It tells the story of five main characters ranging from a financial consultant and a corporate attorney, to a CIA agent and a recruit to extremist groups.

The Movie: If you enjoyed *Traffic*, *Syriana* will strike a familiar chord. The scenes are quick and might feel disjointed, but the script sets out to give an overall view of a slice from the world of oil. It covers quite a lot of ground in the two hours it runs, and includes many great



actors who give great performances. However, at its core, the movie's critical look at the oil world creates the most debate. Anyone with an interest in how this resource impacts the world we currently live in will enjoy the insight *Syriana* offers.

Extras: A documentary interviewing the cast and crew about the project is complemented by an interview with George Clooney about the project. Unfortunately, nothing heavy-hitting is included.



GOOD NIGHT AND GOOD LUCK

Genre: Drama
Rating: 10

This is the story of Edward Murrow and his producer, Fred Friend, the two men who took on Senator Joseph McCarthy during his communist witch-hunt hearings in the fifties. It's an interesting film that puts most of its focus on the men's professional lives and doesn't feel like a bio film. The story itself might be of limited interest, being a story specific to the US, but it's done with style and keeps a good pace. Newshounds will definitely enjoy its dialogue and presentation.

Extras: A making-of that looks at the events of the day, as well as trailers.



FRIDAY THE 13TH

Genre: Horror
Rating: 18V

While there were slashers before, this movie set the trend and even got a nod in *Scream* when Drew Barrymore was quizzed on who the killer in this movie was. It's a trick question, of course, and in an unusual hallmark for a horror, the main baddie wasn't in the original. *Friday the 13th* also set a benchmark for gore and violence, even though the movie wasn't a gore fest. By today's standards, it appears quite camp and cheesy, but it's worth remembering that most slashers that followed lifted their formula from this movie and *Halloween*.

Features: The commentary track gives some interesting depth to the film's history, and fans can revel in the making-of documentary. Jason fans, though, will have to get the second film's Special Edition, but there are plenty of features to keep fans happy.

MARCH OF THE PENGUINS

Cast: Penguins
Director: Luc Jacquet
Genre: Documentary
Rating: A

A FRENCH FILM CREW FILMS the extraordinary ordeal the Emperor Penguin goes through in Antarctica every year. The penguins travel over 100 kilometres to their breeding grounds, where parents of a chick spend up to three months without food while brooding and raising their offspring.

The Movie: *March of the Penguins* sits on the cutting-edge of current wildlife documentaries, at least with its visual depth and style. It is certainly the closest a documentary has come to looking at these birds and their extraordinary quest for survival. Unfortunately, the Zone 2 release is the original French movie, which feels a bit too romanticised and plays as a dialogue of specific penguins being watched. The US edition features narration by Morgan Freeman. As such, the documentary falls a bit short in enlightening viewers to all aspects



of the penguins' journey. Nevertheless, the journey is impressive enough, and the camera work that extends to underwater work is more than sufficient.

Extras: A making-of sheds some light on how this documentary was made. It was quite a challenge considering the hostile environment. The makers took 30 minutes to put on six layers of clothing every morning. The trailers are also included, but sadly little else to complement the film.

Republic of Gamers- CROSSHAIR MOTHERBOARD

Unique System Tweaking Features for
Building Powerful Gaming Machines



It's good to see ASUS launching a new product line, Republic of Gamers (R.O.G), dedicated to the gaming community. Gamers need their computers to be high performance as well as convenient and stylish, and that's where R.O.G comes in. To service this group of extremely knowledgeable users, R.O.G introduces its inaugural product, the Crosshair motherboard, which implemented some great features for both gamers and tweakers to build their dream machines.

Easy System Tweaking with Style - LCD Poster

Many enthusiasts and engineers install a debug card on the motherboard when making system adjustments and upgrades. The card issues a two-digit code for each process during system boot-up, and when the system hangs, the card will freeze to let you know which part of the system is responsible for the error.

LCD Poster, located at the back I/O of the Crosshair, displays the actual names of each boot-process instead of codes. And just like a debug card, when the system hangs due to faulty connection or configuration, the LCD Poster will freeze on the displayed process name that caused the hang up. There is no need to remember the different numeric codes.



Connect in the Dark - EL I/O

Today's gamers demand more than just good performance. They need features that are tailor made for their usage experience.

The Crosshair comes with EL I/O, an impressive feature that simplifies connecting devices by lighting up the back I/O panel for convenient connection in dark environments such as LAN Parties. Say goodbye to jamming devices into the wrong connectors and ports.

Performance and Reliability - 8-Phase EL Cap-less Power

It's apparent that the two main goals of the Crosshair are overclockability and reliability, and 8-Phase EL Cap-less Power is a brand new design that accomplishes exactly the goals mentioned.

It removed the bulky cylinder-type capacitors and replaced them with chip-style polymer aluminum electrolyte capacitors, which are used in server level systems, for better spacing and thermal environment. In addition, unlike the conventional EL capacitors, which are susceptible to leakage and blowups, the new design eliminates capacitor damages once and for all.

Sound with Clarity - SupremeFX and Array Mic

Sound also plays a big part in the overall gaming experience. The SupremeFX audio card included is designed to provide the best gaming audio platform. With 24bit/192kHz full sampling in all surround channels, whether you're hearing game actions through headphones or 7.1 surround speakers, all sound effects will be loud and clear.

The audio card is supplemented with the bundled sophisticated Array Microphone. While competing in game tournaments, the microphone receives only the sound coming from the reception cone and ignores the sound coming from other directions, canceling out a large number of interferences including neighboring speakers and reverberations. It also features "Echo Cancellation Technology", which eliminates the annoying echo during audio and voice applications.



Rich Software Bundle

The Crosshair bundles 3DMark 06 Advanced Edition. As you probably all know already, It is the most popular and authoritative 3D benchmark application used by professionals around the world.

The Crosshair packs a whole lot more. You can go to the ASUS website www.asus.com and check out other innovative features, including onboard LED, onboard switches, Q-Fan Plus and Q-Connector.



Title: The Darkness / Wolverine

Format: Comic – Standalone

Publisher: Top Cow/Marvel

Writer: Frank Tieri

Pencils: Tyler Kirkham

Retail Price: R23.95

THIS ISSUE SETS A face-off scene between The Darkness bearer Jackie Estacado and possibly the most popular Marvel superhero character ever, Wolverine. The comic tells its story by comparing Wolverine's encounter with a former Darkness bearer, Roberto Estacado, to his present day fight against Jackie Estacado. The artwork is absolutely stunning and the story is written in an easy to read style that lets the reader get into the comic from the first page. Although the comic is not PG rated, the art is graphic and of a violent nature, so this should be kept in mind if purchasing for younger readers.

Title: Ghost in the Shell 1.5: Human-Error Processor

Format: Ongoing Series (Preview – not yet released) | **Publisher:** Dark Horse | **Artist:** Shirow Masamune

A MINISERIES THAT WILL COLLECT some previously unpublished (in America) stories by internationally acclaimed manga creator, Shirow Masamune. The eight-part miniseries will consist of four *Ghost in the Shell* tales, set in a fast paced, action packed world where man and machine have become irreversibly intertwined, and now, with the dead apparently walking the streets, the elite agents of Section 9 will have their hands full. If you're a fan of manga, then you already know of Shirow's work, and we don't need to tell you how amazing this series will be. The series is estimated to hit stores in October 2006.



Title: Street Fighter Legends Vol.1 Issue 1

Format: Comic – Ongoing Series | **Publisher:** Udon Comics | **Writer:** Ken Siu-Chong | **Artist:** Omar Dogan | **Retail Price:** R37.95

STREET FIGHTER LEGENDS TAKES a humorous look at the game's character Sakura, from facing off against the egotistical Dan Hibiki, to her everyday life. The comic is written with a refreshingly light-hearted tone, and the nice quality artwork works well for an overall enjoyable read. The comic keeps up with the action packed pages we'd expect from an *SF* comic. Whether you're a *Street Fighter* fan, or you're just in the mood for a good manga style series to get into, *Street Fighter Legends* is definitely worth checking out.



Title: Decimation: Son of M

Format: Graphic Novel | **Publisher:** Marvel | **Writer:** David Hine | **Artist:** David Hine | **Retail Price:** R111.95

THIS TELLS THE STORY of how Pietro Maximoff, previously known as Quicksilver, copes with being a regular and ordinary human, after his powers have been removed, and his urge to get them back. As things become more complicated, Pietro is forced into new deceptions and betrayals in the pursuit of his goal. This is a well-written book with an ever-deepening plot as Pietro struggles with his ambitions, his feelings for his wife and his desire for what is best for their daughter, as well as his own desires to repair the harm that has been done to himself and other mutants that have lost their abilities.



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THE RAVEN'S LOFT

BLUE IN THE (TWO) FACE(S)

A local venue recently hosted a Two-Headed Giant *Magic* tournament. This is a team format that has only recently been sanctioned by the DCI (the governing body for competitive play of many collectible card games). This local event was one of the first in this format in Johannesburg, and attracted a reasonable turnout. With 2HG (Two-Headed Giant) being one of my favourite formats, I snagged a team-mate and we built decks to enter with. After a couple of weeks of practice, the big day arrived and we showed up, still speculating about what we might face...

FEELING BLUE

Not too long ago (around the time of 8th Edition), Wizards of the Coast went on the warpath to tone down the power of Blue, reasoning that Blue's countering and card-drawing abilities were too powerful and, thus, unbalanced. Many felt that the colour had been too harshly emancipated, or 'hosed'. Since then, Blue's counter-magic has been recovering somewhat, with Wizards of the Coast developing varied, interesting and reasonably powerful counter spells.

Why this modern history lesson? My partner and I had been wondering what we might be up against, and agreed that there would be a fair amount of counter-magic. The reality of it was beyond anything we may have anticipated. Very few decks featured little or no Blue, and none of these stayed in contention for long. Blue was heavily represented, and proved strong in the format. The most popular archetype consisted of some combo-based deck played by one 'head', supported by a permission deck (i.e., one heavy in counter-magic and designed to thwart important threats from the opposition). Many of the combo decks even included a fair amount of counter-magic, and therefore Blue as well.

This is a trend that can be expected to continue in future 2HG competitions. The logic is inescapable: Blue foils the enemy's nefarious schemes and helps its team-mate to get the win condition through. Of course, with such a heavy Blue presence, it was inevitable that many counter-wars ensued, with one team attempting to initiate something, the opposing team trying to counter, the original team trying to counter that, and so forth. In our games, we were involved in two situations where there were seven counter spells on the stack at the same time, with each of the players having contributed at least one!

So, what are the implications of this? Is it possible that Wizards of the Coast will crack down on Blue again? Perhaps they may end up enforcing restrictions on Blue in 2HG, or ban some cards in that format. Either situation would be very sad, as control magic adds depth and a cerebral level to the game as a whole. Time will tell...



JUST SAY NO!

Here's what my partner and I played. We didn't win the tournament, but the winning team ran the same basic concept. In 2HG, each team starts with 40 'life'. Loss conditions are the same as usual, so being reduced to no life (normally) results in a loss. However, if either 'head' loses the game, for whatever reason, then the whole team loses. This makes alternative win conditions quite attractive. Particularly efficient is the idea of 'milling'. If either player is unable to draw a card, the team loses. However, players are generally playing 60-card decks*, while the life totals are doubled. Players playing an ordinary beat-down strategy have to inflict double the damage, therefore needing to take twice as long, or commit double the resources in order to accomplish the task in the usual time. 'Twice

as long' means the milling player has more time to accomplish his or her mission, while 'double the resources' leaves the opposing team dangerously vulnerable to board-sweeping effects. My partner and I adopted a milling strategy, with my Blue-Black deck handling the bulk of milling with some counter-magic and some minor board-sweeping against creatures, while my team-mate's Blue-White permission deck provided accelerated card drawing for all players (filling our hands and contributing to the milling) and massive board-sweeping against creatures. This kind of synergy is what can be expected in well-built deck combinations for this format. So should you and a friend be keen to enter such a tournament, keep this fact in mind, and play some Blue!

*** If you don't know why this is advisable, send me an e-mail at alex@sacm.co.za. If I receive enough requests, I'll write an article discussing such issues.**



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GAME OVER

EPILOGUE

KICK 'EM WHILE THEY'RE DOWN

PART OF WHAT MAKES a *Grand Theft Auto* game so much fun is the freedom you are given. Everyone enjoys playing such games, such as *GTA: San Andreas* or *Saints Row*, in different ways. Some people like to complete the story – progressing missions, so that they can experience more of the plot and/or characters. Others enjoy the sideline projects such as driving around as a taxi driver or vigilante. Almost everyone just enjoys driving around the city, exploring slightly and trying not to hit pedestrians. Naturally, there are those who only hit pedestrians, and then see how much hassle they can cause the cops. Recently, however, a new addition has been made to this ever-expanding list – the kicker. Now, the kicker originally had its roots with

players who enjoyed beating hookers over the head with a baseball bat (in the game, of course), and then kicking them while they're down – repeatedly. This new incarnation of the kicker, however, stems from Volition's upcoming game, *Saints Row*. Not even five seconds after starting the recently released demo on Xbox Live, and our esteemed editor was already kicking an innocent trash bag into the road. For an encore, he kicked a dead body into the river and another into the street. If anyone so much as looked at his virtual persona funny, he'd get a kicking and maybe a pistol whipping. Nothing remained safe from his tenacious kicking – people fled in terror. And yet, it certainly looked like he was getting a kick out of it.



Wii Wish you a merry Xmas

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distribution sa
junk mail distribution

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W551N



W551N FEATURES



Core 2 Duo



15.4" WXGA



60/80/100GB



Bluetooth



512~2GB



DVD-Dual Super Multi



4 in 1 Card Reader



15.4" WXGA
Screen



Quick Launch
buttons



Auto Light
Sensor



Bottom: easy to
upgrade

OPTIONAL ACCESSORIES



Port Replicator

1 DC Power Port
2 1394 Port
3 Serial Port
4 External Monitor Port
5 Parallel Port

6 USB V2.0 Port
7 RJ45 1000/100/10MHz
Ethernet LAN Port
8 Stereo Line-out Port
9 Power Switch



High Capacity 7200mAh
Lithium-ion Battery



W551N - Specifications

Intel Centrino Dual Core Processor T2400
(1.83GHz, 65nm, 667MHz, 2M L2)
Intel® 945PM / ICH7-M Chipset
Serial ATA 80GB Hard Disk Drive, 512MB DDR II Memory
Intel 3945ABG Wireless LAN - Dual band antenna
10/100 BaseT Intel LAN, Built-in Bluetooth
NVIDIA GeForce Go 7400 128MB Graphics accelerator
15.4" LCD WXGA, 1280x800, 16.7M colors
DVD-Dual Optical Drive
Microsoft Windows XP Professional
Weight: 2.76 kg